

# ABIDOGUN

*Ini Adewumi*

# PART 1

## **Vignette - Memories**

// *The concept of memory is a fascinating concept, not just in the way it's etched in the mind, but in its retrieval. Remembering is in itself a paradox—a sanctuary in one moment, torment and despair in the next. There is a reason humans are designed to remember and forget—the delicate balance of remembering and forgetting is what defines their humanity. Of this, I am envious.*

*Finding quiet in a bustling community is an elusive endeavor at best, but in those rare moments when the quiet is stumbled upon, memory can meld with stillness. From this ethereal union, fierce anguish may emerge, or one may stumble upon solace so profound that all their sorrows are momentarily forgotten. Whether one finds anguish or solace, they are forming an ephemeral connection with a pocket of reality beyond the world they are familiar with and its troubles. However, just like the silence itself, the connection soon escapes their grasp.*

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<sup>1</sup> [Highlighted texts in this color suggest new text in old chapters]

[Highlighted texts in this color suggest new Vignettes or Lore Note]

## **Chapter 1: The Quiet and the Storm**

### ***The walk home***

In one such moment of quiet, Boahinmaa was found lost in thought, her gaze fixed on something just beneath the horizon—her past. Water from a clay pot overflowed onto her hand, the cold stream soothing the cut she had sustained earlier that day at the farm. Tranquility, solace, and the oddly comforting relief from the cascading water were a tonic to her soul.

The farm was only a short walk from the bank where Boahinmaa (Boah) knelt. The water was a winding stream that flowed into the vast Niger Delta, which served as a lifeline for a few rustic villages dotted along its banks.

The village was cradled by dense forests, their canopy filtering dappled sunlight onto narrow, muddy paths. The air hung heavy with the scent of damp earth and tropical foliage, punctuated by the occasional cry of a distant bird. Life here flowed like the winding stream, slow and steady, steeped in traditions and closely-knit relationships. This geographical seclusion resulted in less traffic from larger boats and the occasional foreign trader, compared to other villages in the area, compelling the community to rely on a bigger nearby village to sell their produce and fish.

Outsiders like Boahinmaa and Ekanem were a rarity, making integration a gradual and sometimes arduous process. As Boahinmaa's gaze drifted to her son, she couldn't help but reflect on their journey. Ekanem, a lanky boy

with bright, inquisitive eyes, stood nearby, his hands busy with the task at hand.

"This batch is very dirty," Ekanem remarked, breaking the silence, as he placed another handful of Ugwu leaves into the basket.

These moments away from the village's noise and expectations were her most cherished times, and she always savored them, even if they lasted only a short while. The people of the village were nice, but they were not kind people. Boah and Ekanem were outsiders, and here in their shared solitude, they found peace, and an opportunity to both remember and forget.

Boahinmaa eyed the swelling clouds with growing unease. The impending storm added urgency to their usually leisurely task. "A storm is coming, Odo (my love), we must hurry," she said, as she brought the pot out of the water, severing her link to the flow of tranquility. She observed a giant cloud, pregnant with rain, drifting slowly across the sky. Its underbelly, dark and brooding, cast long shadows over the landscape.

She placed the pot in the sand and joined Ekanem in washing the rest of the Ugwu leaves. The earthy scent of damp soil mingled with the sharp, green fragrance of the freshly picked leaves. As she finished placing the last batch into the basket, she glanced over at Ekanem who was now washing his hands in the water.

When he finished, a sudden hush fell over the forest, broken only by the chirping of crickets. A thoughtful murmur escaped her lips, '*Crickets... that is fascinating.*' She turned to her son and decided to let him in on her thoughts.

She placed the pot in the sand and joined Ekanem in washing the rest of the Ugwu leaves. As she finished placing the last batch into the basket, she glanced over at Ekanem who was now washing his hands in the water. When he finished, a quiet settled around them again, and a thoughtful murmur escaped her lips, '*Crickets... that is fascinating*', she turned to her son and decided to let him in on her thoughts.

"Crickets are fascinating creatures; do you remember the first time you heard one chirping?" Ekanem's brow furrowed in concentration before he shook his head, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "No, but I bet you're going to tell me all about it, aren't you, Mama?"

"I actually don't remember either," she laughed. "Neither for you, nor me... what I do know though, is that they begin to chirp differently before a storm. I learned that from Obong-ofon." Obong-ofon was what they called a retired farmer known for his sweet pap and repository of rural lore.

"Hmm... Is this like the sayings of the elders? Like how a sneeze means the ancestors are whispering about you?" he replied, laughing.

Boahinmaa began to laugh as well, it wasn't outlandish to think it might be a myth. "Not all those sayings are superstitions though, some of them hold truth," she replied.

"Like my stories that you love so much," she said, tickling him playfully.

"Oh no. Not today, mama. No stories today haha," he began to waddle away.

"I know you enjoy my stories; it's okay, you don't have to admit it. Which is why I am going to tell you because I can tell you're dying to hear it!" Her voice echoed through the bushes around them as she wrapped up the basket containing the Ugwu leaves.

"I think I will pass on that offer, thank you," he replied.

She signaled Ekanem to gather the farm tools before effortlessly lifting the heavy pot onto her head. Despite her familiarity with the path home, she secretly longed for a night free of the necessary trek back home, especially given the onset of the rainy season, and the ominous chirping of the crickets.

Ekanem was always perplexed at his mother's balance and strength, but balancing wasn't the only fascinating part; navigating gracefully without spilling the water or even stopping to adjust - that was the magic.

"This should be a competition, Mama!" Ekanem exclaimed as if this was his first time seeing his mother do it. "I bet I could do it too... well, maybe with a smaller pot." It warmed her heart to see him so happy out here with her. He was a lonely kid in the village. The village hadn't been kind to him, often isolating him due to their outsider status and he would occasionally get picked on, but he never retaliated; he would chuck it up to ignorance.

On one occasion, he was pushed into a puddle of stagnant rainwater, and when she asked him how he felt about what the boys had done to him, "It's because they don't know us yet. When they do, they will like us." Her little intelligent gentleman in a child's body.

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## ***The Tale of Anansi***

"Now, let us weave the tale of the cunning spider king. The god of stories," Boahinmaa said, dropping her pitch to sound like a mysterious man with a deep voice.

As the first raindrops touched the soil, releasing that familiar earthy scent, she began.

*In a land not so far from here dwelled gods, strange creatures, great lords, deities, and powerful men alike. They had vast resources, and food was abundant. Every entity had control over vast lands or, in some cases, entire realms! Life was ideal in all the ways you could wish. But something was missing from their lives—stories.*

*Somewhere in the shadows of this land, there was a spider, sometimes in the literal sense, other times, in cunning and wit. Unlike the gods, deities, and powerful men, he had no wealth, armies, or entire realm to himself. His realm was hidden in the cracks between what there was and what could be.*

Ekanem was getting fascinated, slowly forgetting the storm that was beginning to brew.

*In his desire to escape the gap, to be able to observe both truth and fiction, to remember all events like they truly happened, he began to trick everybody in the realms, spinning webs of deceit and intrigue everywhere he could, until he found the custodian of stories and absorbed their power. He became the most powerful god!*

"And that's the end." Boahinmaa stopped and stared at him, awaiting a response.

"Really...?" Ekanem said, wringing his face; his disappointment was almost palpable.

"But there is another version!" She deftly balanced the pot, freeing her other hand to gesticulate.

"Oh, for a second, I thought you lost balance. Imagine if the pot had slipped and broken," Ekanem said, bursting into laughter. His mother followed suit.

*Anansi observed that the absence of stories wasn't a result of the non-existence of stories, but rather, because Nyame, the great sky god, had gathered all the stories to himself, hoarding them like precious gems.*

*Determined to bring stories to the world, Anansi set out on a great journey. He traveled for moons upon moons, crossing vast deserts and fathomless oceans. Each being he encountered—from the smallest ant to the mightiest elephant—pointed him towards Nyame's celestial realm.*

*Anansi, clever as he was, found the hidden paths between the realms. He spun webs charting his way, and finally reached Nyame's golden palace in the sky.*

*Standing before the great god, Anansi spoke boldly:*

*'Oh mighty Nyame, I wish to share in the treasure of stories you possess.'*

*But Nyame, resplendent on his golden stool, merely gazed through Anansi as if he were invisible. He tried all day to get Nyame's attention.*

"Ahh, like how we ignore the spiders on the ceiling?" Ekanem observed.

Boah nodded, "Most people kill spiders. We don't kill them because of what they mean to me."

"Why would people kill spiders?" Ekanem questioned, perplexed, "They don't bother anybody, and they kill the annoying insects like flies and mosquitoes."

"People don't always share the same beliefs, Odo, those people don't share the same beliefs as us." She smiled, then she continued the story.

*Undeterred, Anansi returned day after day. He arrived earlier and stayed later, his persistence as unbreakable as his strongest web. By the twelfth day, he spent from dawn to dusk in Nyame's presence. By the twenty-first day, as the sun reached its zenith, Nyame's patience finally broke.*

**'Why do you pester me so, little spider?'** Nyame's voice boomed, shaking the very foundations of the place. **'Do you not know who I am?'**

***'I am Nyame, primordial god of the heavens, Odomankoma, the infinitely filled who gave out of his infinite fullness. The embodiment of night's chill and the sun's fury, source of life-giving rain, and life-draining drought. I am all-knowing and all-seeing, and I have seen your plots.'***

*The tempest around him calmed to a gentle breeze as Nyame's eyes, gleaming with starlight, fixed upon Anansi.*

***'Your plot fascinates me, and above that, your audacity amuses me, small one,'*** he expressed.

***'You seek my stories, yet you know not their true nature. Every tale, every whisper, every dream—I know them, not because I hoard them, but because I***

*observe all. Nothing escapes my gaze, not even your scuttling between the cracks of creation.'*

Anansi, showing a courage that belied his size, stood his ground. His voice, though small in comparison to Nyame's thunderous tones, rang clear and true.

*'Great Nyame, Odomankoma, it is precisely because you see all that I have come. The world below thirsts for stories. Surely, in your infinite wisdom, you see the value in sharing this gift?'*

*Nyame paused, a flicker of intrigue sparking in his ancient eyes. He settled back onto his golden stool, regarding Anansi with newfound curiosity.*

***'Perhaps,'*** he mused, ***'there is a way you might prove yourself worthy of such a boon.'*** Anansi responded,

*"I do not seek this ability for just myself, I seek it so that I can share the story with the world, and share the ability for others to tell the stories that as of now, only you can ever know." Nyame's expression softened, a hint of approval in his gaze.*

***'Your ambition is grand, little spider, and a tinge of wisdom in your words—a sign that my wisdom will not go to waste on you. But tell me, why should I entrust such power to you, you are a trickster after all?'*** Anansi, undaunted, replied,

*'It is precisely because I am a trickster that I am best suited for this task, O Wise One. Who better to spread stories than one who can slip between the cracks of the world, reaching places and people that others cannot? Slipping between various realms.'*

*He continued, his voice growing more passionate.*

*'And yes, I am known for my tricks, but is not the greatest trick of all to turn ignorance into wisdom, silence into song? My cleverness is not for trickery alone, but for illumination. The stories you hold, great Nyame, have the power to do just that.'*

Boah stroked her chin and continued,

***'Nyame intrigued, "You speak well, Kwaku Ananse. But clever words are not enough. How do I know you will not use these stories for your own gain?"***

*Anansi spread his arms wide, as if embracing the vastness of Nyame's realm.*

*'Because, O Odomankoma, a story hoarded is a story wasted. My gain will be in the telling, in seeing the light of understanding dawn in the eyes of those who hear. Is that not the truest purpose of wisdom—to be shared?'*

*A low chuckle rumbled through the celestial chamber, like distant thunder.*

***'You continue to surprise me, Anansi. Your cleverness is matched only by your audacity.'***

*Nyame's eyes narrowed, a glint of challenge in their starry depths.*

***'Very well. I shall give you a chance to prove your worth, not just through words, but through deeds...'***

***'My court grows weary of the same entertainments. Complete the following tasks; perhaps I will consider giving you the insight required to attain that which you seek,'*** then, he leaned back on his golden stool.

*Nyame's voice took on a challenging tone, each word resonating with power:*

*'Bring to me these four:*

*Onini the python whose coils can crush mountains,  
Osebo, the cunning leopard whose trickiness rivals your cunning  
Mmotia, the sister fairy untrackable in her movements  
Mmububoro, the dreadful hornets whose stings bring madness*

*'Bring them to me, then we can talk,' Nyame said, clapping his palms. A heavy gust of wind accompanied by thunder blew Anansi away from Nyame's realm, landing him in the realm of his targets.*

"How did he achieve his goal?" Ekanem asked eagerly.

"Who said he did?" his mother answered.

"Of course, he did, or else there would be no story, right?"

"Okay, young sage, let's hear your thoughts. How did Anansi capture Onini?" she stopped walking and asked playfully.

"Oh, I know this one! Obong-ofon says cooked eggs are a good method for catching snakes," Ekanem replied.

"Yes, they are, but that's for snakes that eat chicken eggs, not against a snake as big as Onini; he was massive."

"So, how did he do it?" Ekanem inquired.

*Well... Onini's size wasn't the only thing massive about him. His ego was perhaps larger than he was. She stopped and threw her hands wide up in the air to portray the immensity of Onini's ego.*

*To capture Onini, Anansi approached him with a challenge of his own. 'I overheard a monkey on that big tree over there,' Anansi pointed to a tree off in the distance, 'He said you were shorter than the palm tree over there,' pointing to a tall palm tree.*

*Onini's massive ego wouldn't let him take that lying down! So, he twisted around the tree, breaking it at the base and laying it flat. Then, he decided to prove himself by lying next to the palm tree. This allowed Anansi to quickly web the snake against the tree, tying him up.*

"Very clever, but unrealistic," replied Ekanem. "They don't know the difference between fiction and reality yet, remember?" his mother sighed, then continued the story.

*Next, to capture Osebo, Anansi hid in the tallest tree he could find and observed Osebo for a few days. Osebo was a cunning leopard that hid in short trees, pouncing on any unwitting animals that dared to come close.*

*After eating, the leopard would lay on a specific patch of grass. It was his favorite spot, so when Osebo was out hunting, Anansi and his wife dug a hole in Osebo's favorite spot and covered it with grass and shrubs. After completing his meal, he went to his favorite spot as usual and fell into Anansi's hole.*

*Anansi waited for the leopard to tire out from trying to get out, then came by, offering him help using his webs. When Osebo climbed onto the webs, Anansi also tied him up. Two down, two to go.*

"How can spider webs hold a python and a leopard?" Ekanem questioned, his brow furrowed in doubt.

Boahinmaa's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Anansi is no ordinary spider, my son. I mean, he dug a hole, remember?" she replied.

Their journey had brought them to the outskirts of the village. The looming storm unleashed thunder in the distance, and a drizzle had begun.

Boahinmaa paused her tale, observing first the soil beneath their feet and then the sky.

"He's doing well so far; how does he deal with the hornets, though?"

"Shh. I'm getting there," she replied.

*To capture Mmoatia, the fairy, he had to get creative, as he already had a plan. He went home, carved an Akua doll, and covered it with sap from the gum tree, making it very sticky. He also made some eto—pounded yam—and ventured into the forest...*

Boahinmaa paused, observing first the soil was getting muddy.

She sighed, "I'm afraid I have to end our storytime. I will continue tomorrow. We need to hurry to avoid getting caught in the storm." A tinge of sadness in her voice, but the rain left them no choice; additionally, the goat was out in the rain.

Their small hut was by the edge of the village, a testament to their outsider status. Despite its humble appearance, a closer look revealed the meticulous care with which somebody had smoothed the clay mud walls and thatched the raffia palm leaf roof.

The skies roared with thunder, and silver lightning streaked the sky, momentarily illuminating the darkening landscape. Raindrops pelted the earth, creating puddles in their wake and a rhythm on the hut's roof.

The path leading into the hut had become a slurry of mud, and footprints quickly filled with water. A goat with white streaks across its head was tethered to a nearby Ube tree. It sought refuge under the tree's sparse branches, its bleating adding to the cacophony of sounds around them. However, another sound, distant and distinct, could be heard.

A woman's cries echoed from within the village.. It wasn't a sound of grief or despair, but something else entirely. Ekanem, intrigued, asked, "What is that noise?"

Boahinmaa paused to listen. She recognized the voice, her face awash with realization, she softly muttered, "Awotwe."

Quickly, she instructed Ekanem, "Odo, get the goat under shelter," then rushed inside to start a fire before heading towards the source of the cries.

In the center of the town, a medium-sized hut stood distinctly in the middle of a square. This hut was where women underwent childbirth. Unusually, guards were stationed at the normally unguarded doorway. She slowed her pace to observe, the guards had stern, unwelcoming faces.

In her peripheral vision, she noticed a silhouette approaching her. She turned to see Iredie, a woman in her forties, one of the village midwives. Iredie waved down Boahinmaa.

"Abeni is in labor," Iredie explained, "...but Okeoghene has instructed us not to let anyone into the hut. I know Abeni is your friend, but I cannot let you in. You will have to wait until she is done delivering her baby," Iredie continued towards the hut.

Disappointed but unable to stand out in the rain, Boahinmaa sought shelter under the hut's thatched roof. However, one of the guards, the shorter of the two approached her. The guards were adorned in indigo tunics and leather pauldrons. On their waists were leather belts adorned with charms, bones, and staffs made from ebony wood.

Boahinmaa had always doubted the guards' prowess in actual combat, yet their intimidating presence was enough to keep most civilians, including herself, in line. The guard began to speak, and his voice was much deeper than one would expect, given his stature.

"By order of the chief priest, you are to return to your hut. Leave the midwives to their duties," he ordered, his voice unexpectedly deep. Boahinmaa reluctantly left, giving Iredie a reassuring nod as the midwife entered the hut.

Inside, the air was thick with tension. Abeni lay exhausted yet elated, cradling her newborn. Nneka, the eldest midwife, stood over her, concern etched on her face. After a careful examination, she pulled Iredie aside.

With a soft sigh, she beckoned Iredie over and gingerly placed her hand on Abeni's abdomen and began to speak.

"I have assisted almost every woman who gave birth in the last ten years." Then, she stopped and smiled at Abeni, looked back up at Iredie with sadness in her eyes, then pulled her to the side.

"There is a heaviness," Nneka whispered, her voice breaking. Their eyes locked in silent understanding of the implications.

"We have to prepare her again," Iredie said. "But what about after that?" Nneka asked, her voice barely audible. "He. Can. NOT. Find. Out... Not this time." Nneka whispered as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"We will worry about that after we safely deliver the baby," Iredie responded, keeping her voice as low as possible, but she was overheard by one of the other midwives.

"But we just delivered the baby, right?" one of the other midwives inquired aloud, confusion tingling her voice.

As realization dawned on every face in the room, Abeni understood she was having twins. In this village, such a birth was considered an abomination, a harbinger of misfortune that the chief priest would insist on eradicating.

The birth of the second baby was swifter than the first, and when the baby was presented to her, Abeni stretched out her hands, longing to hold the baby, but her strength betrayed her; her hands gave out and fell limply to her sides. Overcome with exhaustion; she could only lay there and watch the second baby get swaddled as she fell slowly unconscious.

Abeni was a refugee here, blissfully unaware of the fate that awaited her and her newly birthed twin.

## ***Twilight of Trepidation***

Back at Boah's hut, the aroma of dinner filled the air. She had prepared swallow from garri earlier in the day. Though not Ekanem's favorite, he had learned to appreciate it, mainly due to his mother's fondness for the dish.

Whenever he had complained in the past, her response was always the same: '*You get a lot of energy from eating garri. It can keep you sated for two whole days.*' So, Ekanem had learned to stifle his complaints.

As they settled down to eat, Ekanem dug his fingers into the garri, quickly retracting them with a wince. "I'm glad it was not Amala," he whispered, sucking on his fingers to cool them.

"What happened earlier?" he asked, blowing on his next handful of garri. He could sense his mother's uneasiness, a clear sign that something was bothering her.

Without looking up, she replied, "Abeni is in labor. She was with the midwives."

Ekanem, noticing his mother's distress, decided to lift her spirits. As he opened his mouth to sing—despite his self-proclaimed horrible voice—a loud thunderclap shook the hut.

Remembering the thunder strike that had cut their story short earlier, he realized that the best way to raise his mother's spirits was to ask her to complete the story she was telling earlier.

"I wonder how Anansi managed to catch the hornets," he said, swallowing another piece of garri. "Now is a good time to finish telling me how he

managed to capture the fairy. We stopped because of the rain." Before his mother could respond, he added, "We don't have to finish the whole story tonight, but I would like to hear more."

She sighed and smiled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "I thought you said you didn't want to hear my story." She reached out to tickle his belly. "Now you're begging me to finish it." Ekanem laughed sheepishly as she did.

"What was the last thing I told you?" she inquired.

"He took eto into the forest," Ekanem instantly replied.

*Anansi, the cunning spider, had always found a way... she began, her voice taking on the rhythmic cadence from before.*

*He placed the doll where the fairies would fly by, placing the eto in front of the doll, then tied a web to the doll. He then hid behind a bush and began to move the doll with his web. Soon, it caught the attention of one of the fairies, and the fairy, when she saw the food, asked if she could have some of the eto. Anansi pulled the string on the doll, making it seem like it offered eto to Mmoatia. The fairy gets approval from her fellow fairies and devours the eto. After eating, she thanked the doll for the offering, but it refused to acknowledge her gratitude.*

Boah stopped to clear out the rest of the food, and they both washed their hands.

*Upset about this, she returned to her sisters, who had already flown off. She told them what had happened, and they advised her to slap the doll on its face for disrespect. Taking their advice, the fairy returned to the doll and slapped its face.*

*And bam, that's how Anansi got her. She struggled to get off the doll, and eventually, all her limbs got stuck too.*

"That is clever and stupid at the same time." Ekanem laughed as he handed his mother the last calabash.

"Yes, it is. But with the hornets, he was even more ingenious. He filled a calabash with water..."

"Then he threw the nest inside!" Ekanem cut her off.

"Not quite, clever boy; if he did that, one of them could jump out and sting him." She said, "It's even more clever than that. He sprinkled himself with it, pretending to have been caught in the rain. He then told his wife to climb and sprinkle water above the hornet's nest.

*As the first few hornets flew out, he warned them that a storm was coming and that their nest would be destroyed by heavy rain. He then told them that he was about to go into his shelter, advising them to come with him.*

Ekanem lay down on his mat, and his mother paused as she covered him with two wrappers to protect him from the cold.

*'He pointed to his calabash and told them that it would be safe inside. All they had to do was get inside, and he would cover it with banana leaves. After that, he would join them inside and use his webs to secure the leaves, providing safety from the storm for all of them. Trusting Anansi, the hornets agreed and began to enter the calabash one after the other, getting stuck as they flew into the water. Once they were all inside, Anansi quickly sealed the calabash, trapping the hornets inside. Thus, he cleverly captured the hornets.'*

"Anansi is quite clever," Ekanem said, settling onto his mat. "Even though it's a fairytale, I wish to be wise like that when I grow up."

Boahinmaa's face softened as she covered him with two wrappers to ward off the night's chill. "We pray to the gods for food and protection; you should pray to them for wisdom too. In fact, Anansi IS the god of wisdom from our homeland."

"I thought so, too. Imagine if there was a wiser god, how wise would he be?" Ekanem pondered.

"Also, it's not a fairytale," she said with a gentle laugh. "While Anansi holds the title, he is mostly cunning. The ultimate god of our people is Nyankopon."

"Nyankopon? I thought that title belonged to Nyame?" Ekanem questioned, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"They are the same... Nyankopon is another name for Nyame," she explained patiently. "He is the one I pray to when I am in a difficult situation and I do not know what to do. I say, 'Nyame, kyere me kwan na bo me ho ban.'"

"Nyame... kyerr... me" Ekanem struggled to repeat after his mother. She then repeated the prayer slowly, "Nyame, kyere... me... kwan... na bo me ho ban." Ekanem got it this time.

"Good boy! You learn fast", she said, squeezing his cheeks.

"Ehi. This your hair... I need to cut it. Remind me in the morning." she said, running her hand through Ekanem's bushy hair.

As she turned away, a shadow of sadness crossed her face. She disliked the fact that her child was growing up with little knowledge of their culture. Stories were one thing, but there was nothing like home.

"I still don't believe the story. How can a spider web trap a leopard?" Ekanem said, his voice heavy with sleep.

Boahinmaa turned back to him, a mysterious smile playing on her lips. "A very strong spider," she replied. "Besides, some stories are not meant to be taken literally."

As she settled on the stool by the fireplace, Ekanem asked, "Are you not going to sleep?"

"Not yet. I am waiting to see if I can return to see Abeni tonight," she responded. "But don't worry; I will be back immediately."

"OK, mama, greet her for me," he murmured, his eyes already closing.

"I will... You get some sleep, my son. Good night, Odo."

"Good night, mama," he replied, drifting off to sleep.

Boahinmaa sat by the dying embers of the fire, her thoughts torn between the comfort of her son's presence and the worry for her friend Abeni.

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### **Vignette - God's God**

*// My name is Anansi, and the story of Boahinmaa to her son on that fateful evening, is how certain people say I became the god of stories, it's folktale, a metaphor of what truly happened. I could go on to describe my triumph, and Nyame's countenance when I returned with my tasks completed, but this is not my story, and neither is it Ekanem's, nor is it Abeni's.*

*As a god of stories, you'd think I'd be the ultimate storyteller, spinning webs of tales that captivate and enthrall. But here's the thing: even with all my powers, there's a bit of a snag when it comes to telling stories just right, a challenge of precise representation. There are feelings and experiences... nuances that are beyond my ability to translate for mortal comprehension, they cannot be put into words. For instance, how do you describe the color of satisfaction, or the texture of sorrow?*

*Take the taste of Kolanut for example: reading about what Kolanut tastes like, pales in comparison to the full-bodied experience of actually tasting one for the first time. Or imagine trying to get the feel of a symphony by just looking at the music notes on paper, as opposed to letting the melody envelope you and the sounds of the instruments wash over you.*

*Even if I tried my best to explain, some things just don't translate, especially to words. Like trying to catch the fullness of a song by reading its lyrics, without ever hearing the tune.*

*But here I am, tasked with telling you these stories, trying to say the unspeakable, trying to animate the ineffable, to give a voice to both misery and elation, to write down a melody you can't hum or hear. To articulate that which defies expression.*

*Just like the story of anyone, this one only ends in death, and yes, even the story of gods. Ekanem was right - in some ways more than others. We are sometimes mostly myths. We keep you mortals alive just as much as you keep us alive. There is a place where gods go when no one believes in them anymore.*

*As worship and faith in gods begin to wane, so too does our essence. In the outer realms where living gods like me reside, a similar fate awaits us. Yet, as the custodian of stories, my existence is somewhat peculiar. Unlike other transient gods whose essence gradually fades into oblivion, custodian gods like myself are bound to an eternal fate, forever anchored by the stories we safeguard. Our roles vary, but the essence of our duty remains the same: to preserve the narratives that define us.*

*I dwell in a unique domain, surrounded by tales that have breathed their last. Every forgotten saga, every lost myth, finds its way to me, making me the guardian of a graveyard filled with dead stories. I know the graveyard of gods and of stories, but while I know where dead stories go after the grave, I know not where dead gods go. Despite this vast repository of knowledge and memory, I remain ignorant of the final destination of my fellow deities. The afterlife of gods, much like that of humans, is shrouded in mystery. We too, speculate about the existence of a divine creator, (god's god, if you will), pondering what lies beyond our own realm of existence. The thought is as baffling to us as it is to you.*

*But here I am, rambling on, when the essence of what I wish to convey is far simpler. If you seek a tale of heroes and villains, of clear-cut victories and defeats, then perhaps this is where our paths diverge. Close this book if you want a story that follows a hero, for there are none here, close this book, if you want a story about a villain, for there are none here. There are just people, gods, entities, existing in one moment, and gone in the next. Their lives are filled with sorrow and joy.*

*Sit with me for a moment and examine the threads of the tapestry I oversee, each a single tale just as valuable as the next, interwoven into the fabric of space and time. Spend a moment with me, perhaps you might learn a thing or two. With a custodian god, condemned to an eternity of remembrance, holding onto the echoes of what once was.*

//

## **Chapter 2: Out of Blood and mud**

***Out of blood and mud - All he had was grief.***

The rain was finally starting to subside, its persistent patter giving way to an eerie silence. Boro, the village watchman, groaned as he stood up, his back protesting years of solitary night watches. The damp air clung to his skin,

He ignited the fireplace and donned his night watch attire—a uniform adorned with charms, reminiscent of the guards Boah had encountered earlier. Memories of his father and grandfather flooded his mind. They both had been decorated soldiers. He never met his grandfather, but he heard tales about him and how he died in combat. His father, on the other hand, died of old age.

He himself was now getting old and had only seen minor combat fighting bandits. He picked up the torch and walked out to the back of the hut, where he picked up a contraption he had created from wood to keep his back straight whenever he was sitting out on watch.

Boro grabbed his torch and the wooden contraption he'd crafted to support his aging back. He made his way to his post atop a small cliff, the highest point in the otherwise flat terrain. From here, he could survey the landscape: fields of reeds stretching to his left and right, with the forest looming beyond. The village lay behind him, close enough that on a clear night, he could hear the faint sounds of evening activities carried on the wind.

Tonight, however, was different. The moonlight, usually a faithful ally in his vigil, was smothered by thick clouds. The air felt charged, as if nature itself was holding its breath in anticipation of something ominous.

Boro inhaled deeply, savoring the earthy aroma that always followed rain. As he exhaled, a sharp crack pierced the silence—a twig snapping in the bushes to his right. Something was moving in the darkness, skulking along the forest's edge.

Heart racing, Boro extinguished his torch in a nearby calabash of water. With practiced stealth, he crept towards the source of the disturbance. A villager, having ventured out to use the outhouse, watched as Boro disappeared into the shadows—the last time anyone from the village would see their faithful watchman.

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He took a deep breath, and as he let out the breath, he heard a twig snap somewhere in the bushes to his right. Something was moving in the darkness through the edges of the forest.

In the birthing hut, Abeni stirred from her slumber, consciousness slowly seeping back into her weary body. The room was dim, the air thick with the scent of herbs. To her left, a soft melody drifted through the air—one of the maidens singing to a baby. Her baby.

Abeni's eyes darted to the hut's entrance, searching for the guards that had been posted there earlier. They were gone.

The maiden, noticing Abeni's awakening, hurried to her side. As she sat down, a sniffle escaped her, immediately putting Abeni on edge.

"Are you crying?" Abeni's voice was hoarse, laced with concern. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

The maiden shook her head, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "No, nothing is wrong with this baby," she said, gently placing the infant in Abeni's arms. "It's a girl."

"She's beautiful and healthy," the midwife said.

Abeni's heart swelled with joy as she cradled her daughter. In that moment, she knew there was nothing she wouldn't do for this tiny, perfect bundle. But as her eyes scanned the room, a creeping dread began to take hold.

"Where is the other one?" Abeni's voice trembled. "Is it a girl as well?"

The maiden's silence was deafening. Abeni pressed again, her tone more urgent. "Where is my other daughter?" That was when it clicked. The girl had said, '*Nothing is wrong with THIS baby.*'

Abeni held the young girl's left shoulder and calmly asked, "Breathe, what happened to my baby? Is it dead?" The young girl tried to speak, but she burst into tears, her words sinking under the weight of her tears.

She finally managed to reply, her words coming out in choked sobs. "I... I don't know... The chief priest came inside and took it with him... into the forest... Nneka and Iredia followed after him, pleading. They asked me to stay behind and watch over you."

Abeni's world tilted on its axis as she sank to the floor. With shaking hands, she untied the protection charm from around her neck and secured it to her daughter's tiny ankle. Determination surged through her, overriding the pain still lingering from childbirth.

She sprang to her feet, her daughter clutched tightly to her chest, and bolted from the hut. The cool night air hit her like a slap, but she pushed on, her bare feet pounding against the damp earth. She ran blindly through the darkness, her heart leading her towards the one person she knew she could trust.

"Boah! Boah!" Abeni's cries pierced the night as she approached the flickering torch outside Boah's hut.

Boah emerged, her eyes widening in shock at the sight of Abeni. "They took my baby!" Abeni gasped, her words tumbling out between ragged breaths.

Squinting into the gloom, Boah's eyes widened in shock. Abeni, a woman who should have been resting after childbirth, was racing towards her, clutching a bundle to her chest.

"Abeni? Are you okay?" Boah's voice was a mix of confusion and alarm.  
"What are you doing out here? You should be—"

"They took my baby!" Abeni gasped, her words tumbling out between ragged breaths. She stumbled, nearly falling as she reached Boah.

Boah instinctively steadied her, her mind reeling. "Slow down," she urged, eyeing the bundle in Abeni's arms. "What do you mean 'they took your baby'? Is this not your baby?"

Abeni's eyes were wild with fear and desperation. "My other baby. The chief priest... he took her into the forest."

"Other baby?" Boah's brow furrowed. "Abeni, you're not making sense. You just gave birth, you shouldn't even be sta—" Boah stopped.

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open, "Twins... Abeni, you had twins! When did this happen?"

"There's no time!" Abeni's voice cracked with desperation. She thrust the bundle towards Boah. "Please, I need you to watch her. I have to go after them."

Boah didn't take the baby, her hands hovering uncertainly. "Wait, Abeni. Think about what you're saying. You want to go into the forest? Now? In your condition? That's madness!"

"My sister, please come inside," Boah said, trying to guide Abeni inside.

"You don't understand," Abeni pleaded, tears streaming down her face. "It's the chief priest. He'll... he'll kill her. The twisted culture here—because she's a twin. Please, Boah. You're the only one I can trust."

Boah's eyes widened with realization, her gaze darting between Abeni's face and the baby. "The chief priest? But why would he...?" She trailed off, old memories and whispered rumors suddenly taking on new, horrifying meaning.

Abeni seized Boah's hands, pressing them to the bundle. "Will you protect her? Please, I beg you."

Boah's fingers curled around the warm bundle, feeling the weight of the tiny life within. Her voice was barely a whisper, "Like my own."

Relief flooded Abeni's face. She pressed her forehead against Boah's, a gesture of profound trust. "Thank you," she breathed.

As Abeni turned to leave, Boah found her voice again. "Abeni, wait! You can't go alone. Let me—"

But Abeni was already moving, snatching up the torch. "There's no time. Keep her safe. If I don't come back..." Her voice caught. "Tell her I loved her."

Before Boah could protest further, Abeni disappeared into the darkness, leaving only the fading glow of the torch and the weight of an impossible choice in Boah's arms.

Boah stood frozen, the baby clutched to her chest, her mind a whirlwind of fear and indecision. The soft whimper from the bundle snapped her back to reality. She looked down at the tiny face, then back to the forest where Abeni had vanished.

"What have I done?" she whispered to the night. "What have I agreed to?"

As Boah watched the light get dimmer, Ekanem came out of the hut to join his mother. They stood there, watching until they could no longer see the light, then they went back into the hut.

As the torch faded into the darkness, Ekanem emerged from the hut, his young face etched with confusion and worry. "What happened?" he asked.

Boah's gaze remained fixed on the spot where Abeni had vanished. "Abeni wants me to watch her daughter while she goes to find the chief priest," she replied, her tone carefully neutral.

"Why is the chief priest in the forest? Why is she looking for him there?" Ekanem's questions tumbled out, laced with growing concern.

Boah turned to her son, forcing a reassuring smile. "It is nothing to worry about, my son. She just needs to talk to him."

"So, she gave you her baby?!" His voice was a mix of excitement and disbelief. "Can I hold the baby?"

"Someday," his mother replied, "But not today, she is too young. You can come look at her though." she said, beckoning Ekanem to come closer.

Ekanem approached cautiously and peered into the bundle of clothes his mom had cradled in her arms.

Ekanem approached cautiously, peering into the swaddled bundle. The baby's tiny face, peaceful in sleep, captivated him. "Is she asleep?" he whispered, his breath catching in awe.

Boah nodded. "Yes, she is. Babies sleep a lot in the first couple of days after they are born."

Ekanem gazed at the baby, mesmerized. "Did I sleep a lot when I was born?" Ekanem asked, his curiosity piqued.

A soft chuckle escaped Boah. "Oh, yes, a lot."

"Can she hear us?" Ekanem's questions continued, each one drawing him deeper into wonder.

"Yes, she can," Boah explained. "Even in her sleep, she can hear us. She can't understand us yet, but it's comforting for her to know we are here."

The idea of being a source of comfort made Ekanem's face light up. He leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper. "My name is Ekanem, and I will be your friend. We will play together when you get bigger."

Boah's heart swelled. "Thank you, Ekanem," she said warmly. "That's a very kind thing to say. I'm sure she'll be happy to have you as her friend." she said as they walked back into the hut.

As Boah settled into a seat, she gently urged Ekanem back to bed, "You should go back to bed," she said. He complied and returned to his mat, watching his mother in the light of the fireplace, wondering what the baby would look like when she grew up.

As Ekanem's eyes began to close, the tranquility of the night was suddenly shattered by a blood-curdling scream. Boah jumped up, and Ekanem, terror etched on his face, bolted to his mother's side.

"Mama?" Ekanem's voice quavered, eyes wide with fear. "What's happening?"

Before Boah could answer, more screams erupted, accompanied by the sickening sounds of destruction. A man's voice rose above the chaos, "Raiders! Raiders!! Everybody wake up!" His warning cut short by a gurgling cry.

Ekanem flinched at the sound, burying his face in his mother's side. Boah's heart raced, but she forced her voice to remain steady. "Ekanem, look at me," she said, kneeling to meet his eyes. "We need to be brave now, okay?"

The boy nodded, his lower lip trembling. Boah squeezed his shoulder, her touch a lifeline in the growing storm. "No fear," she said firmly. "Stay close to me."

With practiced efficiency, Boah gathered essentials into a wrapper, her movements quick but controlled. Ekanem watched, transfixed by his mother's calm in the face of chaos. She concealed the baby inside the wrapper that she draped around herself.

"What about Abeni?" he asked suddenly, his young mind grappling with the enormity of their situation. "Are we not going to wait for her?"

Boah paused, her hand hovering over the water pot. She turned to Ekanem, her eyes filled with a sadness that made him shrink back. "The soldiers came from the forest, my son," she said softly.

"But..." Ekanem's brow furrowed, connecting the dots with a child's brutal logic. "But Abeni went into the forest. Does that mean...?"

"Abeni is gone," Boah whispered, the words escaping before she could stop them.

Ekanem's face crumpled, tears welling in his eyes. "Gone? Like... forever?"

Boah knelt again, pulling Ekanem close. She could feel him trembling against her. "Listen to me, odo" she said, her voice low and urgent. "Abeni is one of the strongest women I know. If she does survive, we will find her

in the morning. But right now, we need to focus on keeping ourselves safe. Do you understand?"

Ekanem nodded, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. Boah managed a small smile, ruffling his hair. "That's my brave boy. Now, I need you to remember something very important."

She gripped his shoulders, her gaze intense. "If anything happens and we get separated, you run to my canoe and find help. I will find my way to you. Can you promise me that?"

"I promise," Ekanem said, his voice small but determined.

"Nyame, kyere me kwan na bo me ho ban." she said, Ekanem repeated the prayer.

The sounds of approaching soldiers spurred them into action. As they darted from the hut, the dark night sky emblazoned by raging flames on the thatched roofs of all the huts as far as eyes could see.

Ekanem's breath came in short gasps, fear and exertion making his chest tight. "Mama," he panted, "I'm scared."

"I know, Odo," Boah replied, her own breath ragged. "But we must keep moving. Remember what I told you about the canoe?"

Ekanem nodded, clinging tighter to his mother's hand.

As they ran through the chaos, dodging flames and fallen debris. The protection amulet slipped from the baby's ankle and fell to the ground. The acrid smell of smoke burned Ekanem's nostrils, bringing tears to his eyes.

Suddenly, a soldier emerged from the bushes, his blade glinting menacingly in the firelight. Boah skidded to a halt, pushing Ekanem behind her.

"Well, well," the soldier sneered, reeking of sweat and palm wine. "Where do you think you're going?"

Ekanem felt his mother tense. "Run," she hissed over her shoulder.  
"Remember your promise."

"But Mama—"

"Now, Ekanem!"

The soldier lunged forward. Boah met him head-on, her free hand clawing at his face. "Run!" she screamed again.

Torn between fear and loyalty, Ekanem hesitated for a crucial moment. He watched in horror as the soldier's hand connected with his mother's face, sending her sprawling.

Something snapped inside Ekanem. With a cry of rage, he launched himself at the soldier, his small fists pummeling uselessly against the man's leg.

"Ekanem, no!" Boah's voice was thick with blood and fear.

The soldier laughed, casually swatting Ekanem into the bush. The boy hit a tree log hard, the breath knocked from his lungs. Through blurry vision, he saw his mother struggling to her feet, the baby still clutched protectively to her chest inside the wrapper.

She rose up, slamming the wrapper of packed things into the side of the soldier's head. This threw him off balance. She then lunged at him, raising the wrapper, but as she brought it down, the soldier caught her by the wrist.

Time seemed to slow as the soldier drew her into his embrace, impaling her his blade. Ekanem watched, helpless, the sickening sound of metal being retrieved from his mother's flesh would haunt his nightmares for years to come. Then, the baby began to cry.

Boah looked into her arms, and the baby was bleeding, the soldier also peered into Boah's arms, seeing the baby for the first time. His mouth fell open as he dropped his weapon and he fled.

Ekanem's scream was a raw, piercing, heart-wrenching sound that seemed to pause all the chaos around them for a second. Boah's eyes widened in shock, she diverted her gaze locking it with her son's for one eternal moment.

Boah started crawling towards the bush, but was too weak to continue. She stretching out her arm. Her last words to him at that moment was Run... Odø, run!" The words barely a whisper as she collapsed.

Ekanem's world narrowed to a pinpoint. The chaos around him faded to a dull roar. He felt disconnected from his body as he rose, picked up the soldier's discarded weapon.

He pursued after the fleeing soldier, grief and rage propelled him forward as he chased after the fleeing soldier.

He caught up and grabbed the soldier by his left heel. They both tumbled into the mud, and Ekanem's face planting into the mud.

Blinded by blood and mud, unable to see with his left eye and barely able to see through his right, he swung the weapon wildly. The soldier, perhaps overcome by guilt, did not defend himself from the blows, nor did he fight back.

Ekanem struck again, and again, and again, until his arms felt limp and he could no longer muster the strength to swing. When he finally stopped, exhaustion and horror washed over him.

He dropped the weapon and sat there in the mud. As he wiped the mud and blood from his eyes, he caught a glimpse of what used to be the soldier's head, the full extent of what he'd done came into focus. The sight sent him retching, and he vomited the morsels of eba he had consumed from earlier that night.

Through blurry vision, he saw more soldiers approaching in the distance. Fear gripped him anew, but a glint in the mud caught his eye—the fallen amulet. He snatched it up and ran back to where his mother lay.

"Mama, get up! They are coming," he pleaded, shaking her lifeless form. But only silence answered him. The baby, too, lay still and quiet.

Clutching the amulet tightly, he ran, his small feet carrying him away from the only home he'd ever known.

He navigated through the burning village, the heat of the flames searing his skin as he passed. The air was thick with smoke and the nauseating smell of charred flesh. Wails of the dying and the terrified created a hellish cacophony.

Somehow, miraculously, he reached the canoe unseen. As he pushed off into the dark waters, Ekanem watched his entire world burn to ashes. The flickering flames reflected in the tears streaming down his face, creating a surreal dance of light and shadow.

He knew he couldn't row for long; his arms were weak and aching from the violence he'd unleashed. He had no destination, no plan, no hope. All the poor boy had was grief.

### **Vignette - The Deindividuation of Madness**

// When a life becomes part of a group, it can be reduced to a speck, a simple statistic, an obstacle. However, a closer examination reveals a tapestry of complex circumstances interwoven with complex decisions, bearing real consequences.

But this phenomenon isn't limited to the observer alone. When in groups, individuals tend to lose their sense of self, caught up in the fervor of a shared purpose. When that purpose is violence, even the most principled people can overlook actions they'd never even dream of alone.

As that group points at the enemy, even if it's a village of innocents, they only see a malevolent entity whose components need to be eradicated... dehumanizing the other group. The worst of the individuals are quickly revealed, and all they see are faceless adversaries to be eliminated—in the case of Boah, not a defenseless mother, nor a fellow human, just an obstacle.

But what happens when an individual is isolated from the group and confronted with an individual from the opposing group? They may still see an obstacle to be destroyed, and are still likely to engage in actions they'd normally consider immoral—justifying their actions. However, if empathy, guilt, or remorse is felt, it can take hold really fast, and it can swiftly penetrate the veil and regret can surface with a vengeance.

For a brief moment before they reconnect with the group, individuality is restored, and the humanity of the attacked individual is also recognized. In the face of

*overwhelming pressure to conform and destroy, it takes tremendous strength to maintain one's individuality and compassion. But during these lucid moments, it is important for us to reconsider our stance and find the willpower to resist and break away from the madness of groups.*

### ***Out of blood and mud - A mother's resolve***

The runoff from the storm was massive. Abeni trudged through the darkness, wet blades of grass slipping between her toes. She realized she could not see much into the forest. The usually vibrant forest, aglow by bioluminescent bugs, was eerily dark tonight. As though the forest warned of the darkness and sorrow ahead.

As she walked into the forest, she realized could not see far ahead. She looked down, and her ankles were covered with running water. She had to be careful to not fall into the water, as that would mean getting carried away by the current. With her sight betraying her, she tried to listen, hoping to hear the baby cry, but the relentless wind and the rushing water was too loud. She was getting desperate, and began to tear up and cry. Her baby was truly gone. She collapsed falling knees first into the water, as she pleaded with Oya, the orisha of storms to help, but no help came. She was truly helpless.

She let out a guttural scream. Her scream carried with it the weight of the wind, violently blowing off the torch. Then, there was darkness again, but in that moment, the wind subsided, and a sharp tiny voice began to cry in

the distance. Abeni, ecstatic, began wiping her face. She stood up and began running towards the noise. The torrent made running difficult, but she was determined. Even without sight, she ran, unafraid of running into a tree, or slipping.

The crying began to die down, and then it stopped. She stopped running, trying to listen for the baby again, but when she listened, all she heard was another noise. It was pandemonium, from behind, from the village.

Something was not right back at home. Perhaps the guards had found out about her escape and were on the way to find her. As she stood there, she felt a warm flow roll down her thighs. She touched it, and it was a thick liquid. She was still bleeding from childbirth, her head was starting to ring, and she was lost, with no light or clear way forward.

She could not bear to stop or go back now, so she pressed onward, trying to figure out where the crying had come from. She kept walking until she came to a decline/slope in the forest. It looked like the mouth of a cave, there was a very dim glow, a minor break in the darkness, it looked like there were fireflies inside the cave.

Since there was no other clue on where the crying had come from, she started walking towards it. The clouds began to part, revealing a half moon that would have lit up the skies had the storm not wailed through.

With the new light from the moon, she was able to see that there were two caves. She looked at the ground around her, it was covered in floodwater, then she looked around her and there was nothing but forest extending far

beyond what her eyes could see. The only place to go was into the caves.

As she made her way to the first cave, she hoped that the chief would have been merciful enough to place the baby in the cave in the higher elevation. But she knew he probably didn't. The ritual involved them leaving the baby in the forest, not a cave

She chose to follow the incline, it was a difficult climb. She had lost even more blood and her legs were heavy, but she made it across and went into the first cave. Though it was small, it was surprisingly welcoming.

Stalactites hung from the ceiling, fireflies hung from the stalactites, casting a faint glow. The walls shimmered with moisture, despite their roughness, Patches of moss and fern added a hint of life.

The air was damp and earthy, the cave was a little warm. It would have made a nice shelter from the rain and darkness in better circumstances. But there was nothing here, no sign of life, other than some bats and fauna. As she turned around to come out of the cave, she spotted something in the faint moonlight, a silhouette in the water.

She immediately tried to dash for it, but her legs were heavy, and she started to get dizzy. She had lost too much blood. But she didn't come this far to give up on her baby, so she began to slowly crawl down the incline, the silhouette being carried by the water into the cave below. As she made her way to the mouth of the cave, she realized she had to stand again, as the water was starting to rise.

As she inched forward in the darkness, her foot dropped suddenly into a shallow pool of water that covered her leg up to her knee. This was clearly the cave entrance. The cave was super dark, but it was warm as well, similar to the first, but slightly colder. No fireflies here. She began flailing her hands around hoping to find the object that she hoped was her baby, or at least, something to hold on to, then, the crying began again, and she was finally relieved, all night, her hope had been slipping.

But as she made her way towards the noise, the water level rose, higher and higher around her body, then, all of a sudden her leg dropped! With a sharp gasp, she plunged into an even deeper pool of water, and her foot hit a rock inside the water. She barely felt any pain at this point, her body was becoming numb to it all.

Then, the crying of the baby was interrupted by the sound of choking and coughing. The baby was starting to drown. The cave definitely went deeper than the first, she didn't know how much deeper. She could drown if she went too deep, which would mean her child back home would lose both its twin and its mother.

"Aye mi!" (My life!) She cried out. "Ki mo f'omo kan d'ipo ikeji. Olodumare!" (Am I to sacrifice one child for the other, oh God.) Her stomach sank, as she kept going forward slowly as she heard the choking slowly stop, and then, silence, the only sound now was the sound of water flowing into the cave. She began to wade further into the water, and eventually grabbed onto something. She got it!

She yanked it towards herself, but it was a big piece of tree bark, but at least, she was making progress. There was a lot of debris in the cave, she kept wading until she eventually felt a fabric. She reached into the baby's bassinet and grabbed the baby. But the child was not breathing. She immediately began wading her way out of the cave.

She began to attempt to revive the baby, but could not. Her wailing was so pungent and loud, that it scared the bats out of the cave. She was so tired, broken, and awfully all alone. Her legs had totally given out now, and she slowly began to lose consciousness as she cried and held the baby close to her chest. As she fell asleep, the fireflies began to surround her, as though they understood her pain and they meant to console her. She spent the night in the upper cave, and to this day, anyone that enters that cave feels the air of heavy sadness.

## ***Out of Blood and tears - The fate of Abeni***

**>> Chapter still in the works, but ready to be read**

**>> TRIGGER WARNING - this chapter may be emotionally triggering**

The acrid smell of smoke invaded Abeni's nostrils, pulling her from the depths of unconsciousness. The raucous cries of vultures pierced the air, a chilling chorus heralding the dawn of a new, terrible day. As the first pale light of morning seeped through the trees, Abeni stirred, her body aching with every movement. The weight in her arms brought reality crashing back - her baby, lifeless and cold against her chest.

"*Omø mi,*" she whispered, her voice cracking with grief. "My child."

With trembling legs, she began the journey back to the village, cradling her precious burden. Each step was an agony, her body still weak from the ordeals of the previous night. As she approached the outskirts of the village, the scent of smoke grew stronger, and a sense of dread settled in the pit of her stomach.

The sight that greeted her made her blood run cold. Plumes of dark smoke rose from the village, twisting against the brightening sky. Abeni's heart raced, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps. "No, no, no," she muttered, willing her legs to move faster despite the protest of every muscle.

As she drew closer, she could make out Boah's hut through the haze. The door stood open, an ominous invitation. "*Rara se!*" she cried out, her voice a mixture of defiance and despair. "Surely, the gods cannot be this cruel!"

Tears clouded her vision, mingling with the blood that still caked her face.

She could barely see, her eyes aching from the smoke and exhaustion. The walk to Boah's hut felt endless, each step bringing her closer to a truth she wasn't ready to face. Hope, fragile and desperate, clung to her heart.

Perhaps Boah had escaped with the baby. Perhaps...

The hut stood empty, a hollow shell devoid of life. Abeni's emotions warred within her - relief that Boah wasn't here, dread at what that might mean. She stumbled back outside, her eyes scanning the devastation around her.

A flash of color caught her attention - a familiar *iro*, a wrapper she knew as well as her own. Abeni's heart clenched as she followed the trail of blood, her feet moving of their own accord. There, at the edge of the forest, lay Boah.

"Not you too," Abeni's voice broke, the words barely a whisper.

Boah's unseeing eyes stared into the forest, her face frozen in an expression of longing and shame. One hand reached towards the trees, as if seeking salvation even in her final moments. The other clutched Abeni's second baby to her chest.

Memories flooded Abeni's mind - Boah's laughter, her kindness, the way she had welcomed Abeni into the village when she first arrived. Now, that warmth was gone, replaced by the cold stillness of death.

With gentle hands, Abeni closed her friend's eyes. "*Sun re o, Boah,*" she murmured, "Rest well, my friend." She retrieved an *àdire* wrapper from the hut, its indigo patterns a stark contrast to the ashen ground. As she covered Boah's body, she whispered a prayer, her voice thick with unshed tears.

Carefully, she lifted her second baby from Boah's embrace. A flicker of

hope sparked in her chest as she checked for the protection charm on the little arm - only to find it missing. Frantically, she searched the ground, Boah's body, but the charm was nowhere to be found.

"Ekanem," she called out, her voice hoarse and weak. "Ekanem!" Only silence answered her cries.

Abeni wandered through the village, her eyes taking in the full extent of the devastation. Bodies lay strewn about, faces she had known, people she had lived amongst. The soldiers had been thorough in their destruction. As she walked, she spotted a mutilated soldier, his uniform all too familiar.

"Has my past caught up to me?" she whispered, her mind reeling. The Omi soldiers usually raided larger cities. Their presence here, in this small village, sent a chill down her spine. Had they come for her? Had all this death been because of her?

The weight of guilt pressed down on her, threatening to crush her entirely. But she couldn't succumb, not yet. She had to find Ekanem.

As she searched, Abeni's desperate calls for Ekanem grew louder, reflecting her growing panic. "Ekanem!" she cried out, her voice carrying on the wind, only to be swallowed by the indifferent silence of the ruined village. No answer came, just the eerie stillness of death that had settled over the once-vibrant community.

Among the lifeless forms, Abeni recognized Nneka, the woman who had laughed with her over evening fires. Now, she lay still, her once bright eyes dulled by death. The sight of a familiar face among the dead intensified Abeni's sense of loss and isolation.

Exhausted and heartbroken, Abeni made her way back to the forest, retracing her steps to the cave where she had given birth. As she walked, she felt a presence behind her, the weight of unseen eyes on her back. But she was too drained, too lost in her grief to care.

The cave loomed before her, a dark maw in the hillside. Inside, the remnants of her desperate labor surrounded her - the bloodstained ground, the discarded herbs, the lingering scent of fear and hope.

Abeni sank to her knees, her babies cradled in her arms. The silence pressed in around her, broken only by her ragged breathing. In that moment of utter desolation, her mind turned to the darker aspects of her training as an Iyanifa.

She had heard whispers of rituals that could bring back the dead, had even witnessed such magic during her travels. The memory of a witch in Uwuro, forced to resurrect a prince, flashed through her mind. But the consequences of such magic were unpredictable, often dire.

"*Mo gbodò se nkan*," she muttered, "I must do something."

With trembling hands, she began to construct a makeshift shrine. Her voice, weak at first but growing stronger, called out to the Orisha, one after another. Years of training as an Iyanifa had honed her senses to the ebb and flow of mystical energies, and now she called upon every ounce of that knowledge.

"*Omi iye, omi orun*," she whispered, tracing intricate patterns in the air. "Water of life, water of the heavens." Her fingers danced, weaving unseen threads of power. As she worked, the cave seemed to pulse with a faint, blue

light, reminiscent of moonlight reflecting off still waters.

Abeni's voice rose and fell in a haunting chant, performing sacrifices, casting incantations calling upon the Orisha, one by one, beginning with Esu, the intermediary Orisha of all rituals. Each invocation was a masterpiece of ritual language, blending ancient words with the raw power of her intent.

After she had completed various ritual, and finished casting incantations, she followed it with a prayer to Orunmila:

"Orúnmìlà, àlàáfià àti ìmòlé,  
Fún mi ní àgbára láti gba èmí padà,  
Kí àwọn tí ó ti lọ lè padà wá láàyè,  
Jé kí èmí àwọn ọmọ mi dídé léékan sú."

Translation:

"Orunmila, deity of peace and light,  
grant me the power to reclaim their spirits,  
so those who have passed may return to life,  
let the souls of my children rise once again."

The words echoed off the cave walls, each syllable charged with power. Yet, as the last notes faded, the children remained still. She tried appealing to Eshu again.

"Èṣù Láàlú, òrìṣà orita,

*Ní ìbí tí ìgbé àti ìkú pàdé,*

*Fun awon omo wanyii ni itosona pada wa si mi*

*Mu wan pada si igbesi aye."*

Translation:

"Èṣù Láàlú, the deity of the crossroads,  
At the place where life and death meet,  
Bring these children back to me,  
Guide them back to the land of the living."

The air crackled with energy, but still, nothing happened. She prayed to the Orisha of children, Kori, the Orisha of childbirth and fertility Oshun and Iyemoja, but nothing happened either.

Undeterred, Abeni shifted her focus, drawing upon deeper, more primal forces. Her hands moved in intricate gestures as she called up. All to no avail.

"Ah, bi ale Ana, awon orisa maa daun," she said, her voice a mixture of hope and desperation. "Oh, just like last night, The Orisha will surely answer. I just have to be patient."

But as the hours wore on and her prayers went unanswered, Abeni's resolve began to crumble. The weight of her loss, the horror of the day's events, crashed down upon her. In a fit of rage and despair, she tore down the altar, her anguished cries echoing through the cave.

"Ikunle abiyamo o," she cried out, her voice raw with emotion. "The pain

and suffering of a birthing mother!"

Tears streamed down her face as she clutched her children to her chest. In her anguish, her mind turned to the dark ritual she had witnessed years ago in Uwuro. The witch who had brought a prince back to life, only to be executed moments later. Abeni had never learned the full consequences of that spell, but in her desperation, she was willing to risk everything.

"Awon Ṙmo mi," she whispered to her lifeless children, "My children, I will bring you back, whatever the cost."

With shaking hands, she began the ritual. The air in the cave grew heavy, charged with an otherworldly energy. Abeni's voice took on an otherworldly timbre as she chanted words of power, each syllable seeming to tear at the very fabric of reality.

As the ritual reached its climax, Abeni felt a terrible wrenching in her chest. It was as if her very soul was being torn asunder. She gasped, her vision blurring, but forced herself to continue.

*"Unite me with my children!"* she cried out, her voice breaking with the force of her plea.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, almost imperceptibly at first, she felt movement against her chest. A tiny limb twitched, then another. A soft, mewling cry broke the silence of the cave.

"It... worked?" Abeni gasped, hardly daring to believe it. "It worked!"

Joy surged through her, but it was short-lived. As her babies stirred to life, Abeni felt her own strength ebbing away. Her vision darkened at the edges,

her limbs growing heavy.

"Ayé kan, fi d'ípò méjì," she murmured, understanding dawning on her as her consciousness began to fade. "One life, sacrificed in place of two."

As her arms fell limply to her sides, gently depositing the now-crying infants on the cave floor, a shadow fell across the cave entrance.

A tall, slender stood man stood there, his silhouette backlit by the rising moon. In his hand, he clutched a ceremonial staff adorned with cowrie shells. The staff passed down through generations of village Chief Priests.

"By the gods," he breathed, his voice a mixture of awe and horror. His ceremonial staff slipped from his grasp, landing with a hollow thud that echoed through the cavern.

He approached cautiously, kneeling beside Abeni's prone form. With trembling fingers, he reached out to touch her hand, then recoiled in shock. "Abeni?" he whispered, hope and dread warring in his voice.

To his astonishment, Abeni's eyelids fluttered open. Her eyes, now completely bloodshot, struggled to focus on his face.

"You...!" she managed to rasp, recognition and anger flickering in her gaze.  
"Why? Why my ch-children?"

The priest took a tentative step forward, his hands trembling. "Abeni, I..." He faltered, words failing him as he took in the scene – the makeshift altar, the glowing tear on the ground, the crying infants.

"Speak Oke..." Abeni commanded, her voice weak but sharp. "Or have the gods finally struck you dumb."

The priest's eyes darted between Abeni and the now-breathing infants. "This... this is impossible. The children died... I watched you... carry them with you from the village" he tried to process the sequence of events, confusion written all over him.

Abeni's laugh was bitter, ending in a cough. "You followed me... and yet you did nothing. As always."

The priest flinched as if struck. "I couldn't... I didn't know..." He paused, gathering himself. "What have you done, Abeni? This magic... it's not natural."

"Natural?" Abeni spat the word. "Was it natural to tear a child from its mother's breast? To leave an innocent child to die in the forest?" Her voice dropped to a whisper, "To let soldiers slaughter an entire village?"

"I did not!" he lashed out, then, collected himself, "I did not abandon the village... it was too late when I returned" he said, diverting his gaze to the floor.

His shoulders sagged under the weight of her words. "The omens... the signs... They all pointed to... I was trying to protect—".

"Protect?" Abeni's voice cracked. "Look around you!—" she coughed up some blood, "The child died... but where's is the village now?"

The priest's eyes darted to the infants. "How? This... this isn't possible," a mix of fear and wonder on his face, "They... they breathe... they cry... they live again."

"Many things are possible," Abeni said, her voice softening slightly. "If one is willing to pay the price."

The priest wondered for a moment, then, understanding dawned in his eyes. "Abeni, you didn't..."

"I did what I had to," she said firmly. "What you forced me to do."

Silence fell, heavy and suffocating. The babies' cries echoed off the cave walls.

The priest flinched. "In the forest... I... I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave your child in the forest. I stayed there, holding her, unable to let go."

"But you took her there in the first place," Abeni said, her voice softening slightly.

"If I hadn't..." the priest trailed off, his eyes distant. "The soldiers came through the forest. If I'd returned when I was supposed to..."

"You'd be dead," Abeni finished for him. A moment of silence hung between them.

"Perhaps... perhaps it was meant to be this way," the priest said, his voice uncertain.

Abeni's laugh turned into a cough, she spat blood. "Meant to be? Was all this suffering, all this death 'meant to be'?"

"Was it worth it?" the priest finally asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "The price of the ritual... for two lives?"

Abeni's gaze never wavered, even though all she could see now was a

silhouette. "Ask me that again when it's your child on the altar of tradition."

The priest looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "I never wanted... I thought I was protecting everyone."

"Or you were protecting yourself... you can't say you protected us?" Abeni's voice cracked with emotion. "Who protected Boah, or Nneka, or any of the others?"

"I'm sorry," the priest said, the words sounding hollow even to his own ears. "I was wrong. So terribly wrong."

Abeni's expression softened slightly, but her voice remained firm. "Sorry doesn't bring back the dead. Sorry doesn't undo what's been done."

"Then let me make it right," he pleaded. "Tell me how to make any of this right.", "Show me..." he broke down.

The priest's shoulders sagged. "I've carried this burden for so long. The weight of every child... if I have to carry any more. I will sink into the earth itself."

"And I carry the weight of my choices now," Abeni's strength was fading fast. The priest responded, but she could no longer make out what he was saying.

As Abeni listened to the priest's words, each breath a struggle, her thoughts drifted to her twin sister, Abebi. Their last embrace, the unspoken words in their final goodbye. There were things they could have said, but her sister's last words to her were, "Remember the moon."

"The children," Abeni managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper. "They must NOT die again. I will haunt you if they do." She paused, gathering her last reserves of strength. "Take them back to my village, to my sister. Tell her I remembered the moon, to tell the girls about the moon... so that I may live on in their hearts, every night."

The priest nodded solemnly, tears in his eyes. "I will, Abeni. I swear it."

A small, sad smile curved Abeni's lips. "Then perhaps there's hope for you yet." Her eyes began to close, she began to murmur incoherently, "...the moon. It guides us all, we have to keep looking up... Iya Ibeji said we must not go near the water, Abebi."

As she spoke, a single tear rolled down her temple, glowing with an otherworldly light. Where it touched the ground, a single black flower blossomed - a tear of joy, not for happiness, but for sorrow finally released. It was a farewell to grief, a testament to the process of letting go.

Abeni's eyes closed for the final time, and memories of her sister flooded her mind. She saw them as children, running beneath the moonlit sky, their laughter echoing in the night. Their hands were clasped tightly, and as they ran, the moonlight seemed to dance around them, responding to their presence.

In this memory, young Abeni turned to her sister, her eyes wide with wonder. "Abebi, do you feel it? The moon, the water— it's singing to us!"

Abebi nodded, her smile radiant. "I hear it too... their song is our birthright."

The memory shifted, and Abeni saw herself and Abebi as young women,

standing waist-deep in a sacred river. Their hands were raised to the full moon above, its light turning the water to liquid silver.

"Remember, Abeni," Abebi's voice echoed in her mind, "As long as we remember each other, remember the moon, we will never truly be apart."

A smile, small but genuine, curved Abeni's lips. In her final moments, she felt the truth of her sister's words. Though they were separated by distance, their bond transcended the physical world.

Then, to another memory of the sisters exiting the water in the morning, approaching the village, reaching their compound to see their mother's body being brought out of the hut. How they wailed at the sight.

As that memory faded, she was in the embrace of a hunter, as he whispered in her ears, "My next life will be full of misery if I do not find you again in it." As the vision faded, Abeni felt a profound sense of peace wash over her.

Her hand slipped from the priest's grasp, and in that moment, a thunderous noise rang through the cave. The ground trembled beneath them, and a violent wind howled from the depths of the cave. The priest hunched over the babies, shielding them from the supernatural gale.

When the wind died down and the earth stilled, the priest looked up, tears streaming down his face. Abeni lay still, her features peaceful in death. The babies cried, their voices a reminder of the life that had been given and the life that had been lost.

That was when he finally felt the full weight of everything that had happened, and he collapsed to the floor wailing by her body.

After a while, Okeoghene gathered the infants in his arms, his heart heavy with the weight of his actions and the responsibility now placed upon him. As he stood to leave, he cast one last look at Abeni's form.

"*Dimei Ebi*, Abeni," he whispered. "May your journey to the afterlife be much less tumultuous than the one you walked in life... Find peace. I swear by all the gods, I will see your children safely to your sister. Your sacrifice will not be in vain"

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## **An Adamant Soul**

After Abeni's passing, the chief priest laid her to rest in the cave, next to the enigmatic black flower. He then carried the babies, alongside the weight of his shame and sorrow. As he made his way back to the village, the familiar path twisted unexpectedly, presenting a fork in the road.

He became confused. 'Perhaps, I missed the path home.' he thought, turning to retrace his steps. To his horror, the road behind him had vanished, replaced by an impenetrable wall of trees. Fear slithered down his spine.

When he turned around again, and the fork in the road was gone. A small hand pressed against his spine, making him recoil in terror. There, behind him, a little boy was standing, blood oozing from his eyes, ears, and nose.

The priest let out a blood-curdling shriek, stumbling backwards until his back met the rough bark of a tree. This startled the babies, and they began to wail.

He looked down into his arms, and when he looked back up, the forest was back to normal. The boy was gone, and the path was familiar with had reappeared.

For the remainder of his journey, the priest's eyes never left the path, afraid that a moment's distraction might plunge him back into that terrifying otherworld.

Upon reaching the village's edge, the sight that greeted him shattered what little composure he had left. The once-vibrant community lay in ruins, a testament to the carnage that had unfolded. Overwhelmed, he lashed out at the gods, his voice rising from incoherent yells to anguished questions.

"Why have you forsaken us? What have we done to deserve such wrath?" His voice echoed through the devastated village, bouncing off the charred remains of homes once filled with laughter and life. The deafening silence that followed was more damning than any divine retribution.

As he trudged through the remnants of the village, memories and regret walked beside him. The weight of his decisions, the lives he had irreparably altered or ended, pressed down upon him like a physical burden.

He eventually found his way to the center of the village, he placed the babies on a patch of leaves he gathered. Sinking to his knees, his hands dug into the dirt, as if seeking answers from the soil itself. "Are we merely pawns in your celestial games? Is our suffering so trivial to you?" he cried out, his voice hoarse. When he got no response, he looked up to the sky and asked the same question.

He went to the back of his house and grabbed tools to dig with. There, he began to dig a grave, every strike into the soil, a reminder of each life lost. As he dug, doubt crept into the hole with him and whispered questions of doubt into his heart - perhaps, the twins had really brought misfortune to the village, or had he failed in his sacred duties?

"No, I have performed the rites a thousand times... speaking to silent gods."

he muttered into the darkness. Abeni's final words haunted him. He stared at the moon and the moon stared back, indifferent to his predicament.

"But her gods... they listened to her, even defying death on her behalf, while our gods abandoned us." he continued, as he dropped his gaze and followed the light of the moon down from the sky unto the ruins of the village in the distance.

With a heavy, uncertain heart, he continued his penance, digging in the darkness, with only the light of the moon as his guide, until the clouds returned. When the night got too dark to see, he took wood from one of the burned houses and lit a torch, then he continued to dig until dawn took its first peek from under the blanket of the dark clouds, revealing a hole large enough to lay many to rest.

After he placed the first body in the grave, he commenced with the funeral rites. But as he said the first words, he fell to his knees, overwhelmed with emotion, not only over the loss of his people, but also over the loss of his faith.

The once sacred words felt empty, and the rites felt hollow. He carried as many of the dead as he could to the grave, where he prepared every single one of them to be laid to rest. Taking off the armor, charms, jewelry and amulets worn by the citizens and soldiers alike.

He could not possibly bathe them all as was tradition. Some of the bodies were too charred, nor could he clothe them in the right attire, for there

were none left. The only thing he could have offered were the rites, but the only rite that felt appropriate now was an apology to each one of the people as he laid them to rest.

When morning came around, the babies began to cry. They were hungry. Unsure on how to feed the infants, he picked them up, and wandered around the village looking for sustenance.

As he walked through the village, he witnessed the aftermath of the horrors that Ekanem had experienced two nights before and Abeni the day after, and he wept. His work was also not done, for there were many more to lay to rest.

After some searching, he stumbled upon raw millet pap (ogi) in one of the few huts left unscathed by the invaders. He started a fire and prepared the pap. By the time it was ready, the sun was high, casting its harsh heat over the village. He retreated into the hut's meager shade and tried to feed the twins. They wailed relentlessly, barely taking the pap, but eventually, hunger overcame them.

Once the babies were fed and asleep, he tried to rest. Exhaustion weighed on him, yet sleep eluded him. His eyes traced the thatch ceiling above, restless and unyielding. There was no rest for the weary.

Once the babies were fed and asleep, he tried to rest. Exhaustion weighed

on him, yet sleep eluded him. His eyes traced the thatch ceiling above, restless and unyielding. His eyes searched for rest, but they could find none, for there was no rest for the wicked.

Weary of his sorrow, he forced himself back to work, digging graves beneath the relentless sun. After a while, he ventured into the forest to the site where he had personally felled four attackers. There, he began to bury their bodies too.

*'I was lucky, I only came across patrolling forces, had I gotten here any earlier, I would have died,'* he thought to himself as he placed the second soldier into the grave.

The last body was that of the fiercest soldier. As he lowered the man into the grave, memories of that brutal night surged back. The battle had been grueling; both were evenly matched, and the struggle dragged on until exhaustion left them barely able to move. They paused, panting in the darkness, momentarily too fatigued to fight.

But while they rested, the priest made a dishonorable move. As soon as he had caught his breath, he picked up a large rock and charged at the man, smashing the man's head skull in before he could react.

Believing the fight was over, the priest turned to leave, but a sudden surge of movement caught him off guard. The soldier, refusing to die quietly, lunged forward and landed a crushing blow to the priest's face. The impact was so severe that it sent him spiraling into darkness.

When he finally awoke, the first light of dawn was creeping through the trees. The soldier lay beside him, lifeless, a pool of blood darkening the forest floor. The priest gathered his belongings and started to walk, his body aching and his mind dazed.

He hadn't gone far when he spotted Abeni, making her way back into the forest that day.

By the time night fell, he had buried every villager slain in the attack. But as he placed the bodies in the ground, a troubling realization struck him: there wasn't a single enemy soldier among the dead. He retraced his steps, examining each blood-soaked battlefield, but all he found were the fallen defenders of the village. It was as if the enemy bodies had vanished—perhaps their comrades had taken them.

In one of the huts, he discovered a basket large enough to carry the twins. He returned to the hut, gathered the babies, and headed toward the nearby farms, hoping to find food.

The first farm yielded only yams and cocoyams, their readiness for harvest uncertain to him. He knew little about farming and was too exhausted to attempt it that evening. He pressed on, making his way to the next farm, hunger and fatigue weighing heavily on him.

The next farm had two pawpaw trees and a few scattered plantain trees, along with a small vegetable plot. As he surveyed the trees, he noticed few ripe fruits—likely harvested by the farmer not long before. A pole leaned against one of the trees, so he picked it up and began to prod at the

remaining fruit. After some effort, he managed to pluck two pawpaws that were just ripe enough. He also cut down a hand of plantains before heading back to the village.

Once there, he boiled the plantains and mashed the pawpaws into a paste. The twins were reluctant to eat, but he managed to coax enough of the mixture into their mouths to quiet their cries.

With the babies fed, he returned to one of the huts. He hung a mat over the doorpost and laid the infants gently on a wooden bench, covering them with a wrapper. Finally, he spread himself out on the mat and, for the first time in days, found a brief moment of rest.

## **Vignette - The Evolution of belief**

// Throughout history, humans have grappled with the peculiarities of nature, from the chameleon's ability to change color to the birth of albino children to black parents. Yet, one of the most perplexing occurrences has been the conception of twins—a child born as a duplicate of itself.

In ancient times, many West African cultures, including the Yoruba, viewed twins as harbingers of unpredictable power, their very existence threatening the delicate balance between the earthly and spiritual realms. Some saw them as a cosmic disruption, while others attributed their presence to witchcraft or demonic intervention. Fearing the potential consequences, communities resorted to various practices, from ritual sacrifices to abandoning the babies to the elements or exiling the mother and her children from the town.

However, as time passed, beliefs began to shift. Some cultures embraced twins, even elevating them to a status second only to the gods—case in point, the Yoruba as Orisha-Ibeji. This evolution of belief is a testament to the ever-changing nature of human perception, with each generation championing its own convictions, only for them to fall out of favor in the decades that follow.

The impermanence of belief is a curious thing. Some beliefs endure for millennia, while others fade within a few short years. Yet, regardless of their longevity, the impact of these beliefs often remains eternal in the lives of those they touch. The scars from the sacrifice of twins, the trauma of exile, and the reverence they received—these experiences shape society's fabric, leaving an indelible mark on the affected individuals and subsequent generations.

*To provide more context and background, I will include chapters called Lore Notes. These notes will offer insights and stories that enhance the main narrative without requiring full chapters of their own.*

## Lore Notes - Ijabare

// Once a relentless warring kingdom, the Omi Kingdom's fate took a dramatic turn upon the ascension of a young Emperor Ijabare. Known for their valor and battle prowess, few men in Omi lived to see old age, as strength was revered over everything else with the exception of wisdom—especially when both were found together.

In his youth, Ijabare led a victorious campaign against the a vibrant trading hub—the Kingdom of Kokomori. Kokomori's King had insulted the Omi King, calling him an intellectually stunted brute and scorned the Omi as a society of chimpanzees. After successful conquest, Ijabare spent some time in the Kingdom, and the King's words haunted him, for he realized they held some truth . His time in Kokomori brought a new perspective.

When Ijabare returned home, he brought with him many goods, artisans, craftsmen, and more. He pledged all of the goods he brought to the Kingdom, but he requested that the intellectuals, artisans and musician reside with him to keep him company. The King agreed. Ijabare also requested for a small piece of land, in the marshes, which his father found strange. The prince claimed that the gods had shown him a vision, corroborated by a priest. The King granted this request as well.

Ijabare approached all the King's generals and leaders, offering them gifts such as fabrics, weapons, and even slaves. He then constructed a medium-sized bridge for easy access to the marshes, where he built a modest residence and a storage space for precious goods like salt, spices, ceramics, and musical instruments.

At his residence, he initiated gatherings every half moon, initially inviting only notable young men of his generation. At these parties, he would have artisans display their crafts, and would have musicians play music that blended traditional music with foreign influences, such as with Shekere (percussion instrument) and Kora (stringed instrument), and soon, these parties became the talk of the Kingdom, and any talented young man aspired to attend.

As his influence grew, Ijabare began to engage with select guests individually, sensing their sentiments and spending evenings with them. He would expose them to foreign ideas, inquire about their views of the world, learning their perspectives, secrets, and knowledge gained from their own campaigns. These guests would depart with gifts from the prince, often fabrics, but sometimes ceramics, salt, or spices.

With this information, Ijabare became more informed about the kingdom's inner workings than the king himself. He discerned the bitterness among the men of his generation toward the status quo. Seeing an opportunity, Ijabare used his vast knowledge to impart wisdom and what appeared to be prophecies. This understanding of his people's discontent laid the groundwork for his eventual coup, knowing that many secretly desired change.

People began to come to him for advice and prophecy, and he began to give prophecies, he predicted an eclipse and predicted the death of several chiefs in the village. Events that suspiciously came to pass just as he foretold. He requested that the King allow him train an elite force for the Kingdom, to which his father agreed. So, he began teaching strategic warfare to select young men and then, trained a

team of 100 elite archers—the Omi up to this point were known only as excellent infantry and calvarymen.

Exactly two years after his return, he executed an elaborately planned coup. He raided the castle and asked his father to abdicate the throne. The King refused and challenged his son to combat. He defeated his father and summarily executed him, going against the cultural norm of sparing the defeated to live in shame.

After executing his father, he exiled himself back to the marshes, where he received a large shipment from Kokomori, cut off the bridge, and fortified the marshes. When retaliation came, from loyalists to his father and his rivals, nobody could cross the marshes, and those that dared enter were dispelled by the 100 archers, sometimes shooting them in the leg and leaving them as food to the hippo that resided in the marshes.

He forced the surviving elders—generals, council members, and their sons—into brutal trials that only the fittest survived, usually the sons. He then gathered the people to the palace, explaining how the gods had shown him visions and instructed him. He described a future impossible with the old leaders in power. He planned an elaborate funeral for his father and others who died, honoring them in the Hall of Remembrance. Through strategic executions, prophecies (real or not), and fear, he cemented his rule.

He spread propaganda about a world without war, portraying the ancestors' wars as archaic despite their past greatness. He promised to reduce wars until none remained. He began employing similar schemes to those he used to acquire power within his own kingdom to conquer others.

Ijabare began to train some of the exceptional men he had found and groomed them into vassals for himself. To become a vassal, one had to become an eunuch (be castrated), and be stripped of all military rank/power, then become focused on one specialty, usually commerce.

While the emperor now focused on commerce, he remained a formidable fighter and still very much enjoyed conquest. He sent his generals on campaigns, and when a location was captured, or considered strategic. He sent a vassals there to either rule, or establish commerce. In the ranks of the generals and vassals, he had many spies, and he would execute anyone that was ever even perceived to have a bone of discontent, let alone disloyalty.

Over the years, Ijabare grew impatient with elaborate schemes and began to employ violent, borderline horrific methods, such as wiping out entire towns including infants.

Two decades later, he began a new campaign, sending his forces southwards, and rotating generals yearly. One of these generals was Jorobu, one of the King's two favorite generals. In charge of the largest battalion in the Kingdom.

Ijabare sent Jorobu west and another general, Braaka, east. Jorobu's forces worked their way through the West and the other forces through the East, capturing strategic objectives for the empire, one of this was the ports of Obutong<sup>2</sup>, with Okpo<sup>3</sup> being collateral damage. Now, they were reaching the penultimate milestone, the town of Oritameje—meaning a crossroad of 7 roads.

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<sup>2</sup> Obutong: one of the largest towns on the coast

<sup>3</sup> Okpo: The village where Ekanem and his mother resided.

*Oritameji was located at a crossroads that connected trade routes, making it strategically vital. Establishing a military outpost here would expand their territorial fringes to this area and enable an easy invasion of Ilenyo.*

*Establishing an outpost in Ilenyo would allow Ijabare's empire to exert influence over surrounding areas, securing economic advantages and expanding their territorial control without further conquest. Jorobu and his men after months of conquest made their way to the forests on the fringes of Oritameje.*

## **On the Brink**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

General Jorobu scooped up another handful of mud and smeared it across his arm. The rain had just ceased, heightening his vigilance against hunters who might soon traverse the forest. He and all his men had made a camp that blended in with the surrounding jungle to avoid passing hunters, scouts and patrols. He ensured his tent was camouflaged with foliage, designing it to collapse swiftly, erasing any trace of his presence.

Jorobu and his men were under strict orders to await reinforcement from Braaka. This was their penultimate milestone, and the half-moon had appeared the previous night. This was their second day waiting in this jungle for the rendezvous with Braaka's battalion.

Jorobu's concerns grew as he contemplated the potential delays of Braaka's forces—perhaps an ambush or an unexpected conflict. Such uncertainties were troubling in unfamiliar territory.

He was worried that the whole camp was overcrowded, which could lead to disease, depletion of resources faster, or even expose them to a coordinated ambush should the enemies realize their presence in the jungle. So, he decided to disperse his forces to allow for more flexible and responsive maneuvers, and allow for better surveillance of the area.

The entirety of today was spent setting up 2 satellite camps filled with most of the capable soldiers. He oversaw the movement of the men through the forest without detection, and throughout the day, he kept thinking about

how to adapt his strategy in the event that the reinforcements never arrive. Weariness weighed on him, compounded by news of increasing illness among his troops. A decisive action was imminent.

As night enveloped the camp, Jorobu withdrew a carved wooden horse from his bag—a gift from his estranged son. He set it beside him under the moonlight seeping through an opening in his tent.

His son was going the way of the artisan, and Jorobu hated this, his son was either going to be mediocre or become an eunuch to matter, so, he stopped talking to his son. Instead, he would talk to the wooden horse whenever he had something he wished to discuss with his son and when he sought comfort, he would admire the horse and think about his son.

He held on to the carved wooden horse firmly. He created an opening on the top of his tent for moonlight to come in. He glanced at the horse, then, he began to speak in a very low voice, his voice laden by burden.

“I have a decision to make, we cannot bear to delay further; every passing hour weakens us as our resources dwindle,” he whispered, setting the horse down as if awaiting a response. “If we strike now, the element of surprise might still be ours. Yet discovery here could provoke the entire region against us.”

Picking up the horse again, he continued, “I’ll give it until tomorrow. If no word comes from Braaka, we attack at dawn, ready or not.” He squeezed the

horse, his resolve hardening, before murmuring, “I hope it’s the right call.” Gently placing the horse back in his bag, he settled down to sleep

The following day, Braaka made his way through the camp to check on everyone. A few of the men had succumbed to their illness during the night. The general made his way through the two remaining camp and discovered that some of those healthy soldiers had fallen sick as well.

At the third camp, he receives reports from scouts stating that the people of the village seemed to be gearing up for battle, and that they were spotted putting up defenses in the plains, which would suggest that they knew of the presence of the battalion.

Jorobu asked everybody to gather, the jig was up, and now they had to change strategies. After everyone at the camp gathered, they walked back to the origin camp, and he stood in front of everyone. Then, he began to walk slowly and speak in a solemn voice.

“Warriors, we stand on the brink. We have waited... hoped for reinforcement that may never arrive. Every moment we wait, the enemy gets stronger, and our strength diminish. If they discover the remaining camps, we will have to face not just this town, but all their neighbors at the same time.” he stopped, then he looked and noticed that his tone was killing the morale, so, he stood tall, picked up a spear and slammed it into the ground and began to speak again.

“Warriors of Omi! The leopards of Ijabare!! We are the most elite fighters in all of the lands we have come across, and this one is no different. We could wait for reinforcement a little more, but I say, we have the advantage of numbers now, as slight as it may be, if we strike swiftly before they can complete their defenses, we can surprise and overpower them before they realize just how many of us there truly are. This is not just about one battle; it's about securing our future, that town is the road to health for those of us that are sickThis is not just about one battle; it's about securing our future. That town is the key to health for those of us who are sick. We do not have enough resources to return home now. We did not come this far to fail. And after this war, we will own all of this land all the way to Ilenyo where our people will thrive even more than they already do today.” He then raised his voice with determination and continued.

“We fight not just for our survival, but for the stability and expansion of our lands, for the prosperity of our children. I will not promise you an easy fight, but I promise you the best of my abilities as a strategist and a warrior. We will sack this land and return home with the taste of glory lingering in our mouths.” he pulled the spear out of the ground and threw it into a massive tree in the direction of Oritameje. “Strike hard and strike fast!!” he rallied, igniting a roar of approval from his troops.

## ***Out of blood and tears - A Mother's Wrath***

Ajanku stood 6 feet and 6 inches, not much scared him. He became general not just because of his physical strength, but also because of his ability to make the right decision in situations where others struggled to make tough decisions. He had good judgment. But today was an exception. Not only was he scared, he was unsure what to do. As the Balogun (war chief), he had to make a heart-wrenching decision that involved choosing between staying back to protect his family or standing with his men to defend the village.

His responsibilities weighed heavily on him, not only the present decisions, but also past decisions. One of his scouts had been condemned to death for the murder of another scout. He had taken the accused boy under his wing despite rumors and the boy's reputation. Ajanaku had begun to doubt his qualifications and abilities as both a leader and general.

He had been standing in front of the hut for what seemed like an eternity, the bonds of his duties tugging at him on one side, and the love of his family pulling on him in the opposite direction. In this moment, the doorpost was a metaphorical line that crossing meant making a decision he could not change after it was made. He knew that both Abebi and their unborn child needed his protection. Abebi was perfectly capable of defending her, but not in such a vulnerable state.

“Ajanaku?” Abebi said softly “Is that you, my love?”

“Yes”, he replied as he parted the palm fronds and came in.

“What is the update?” she asked as Ajanaku approached the mat

“They are upon us, Abebi... we have mere moments” he said as he squeezed her hands.

“I’ve been telling the council, we need to move into the mountains. Mounting a defense from there... Ahhh!” she let out a yelp, her contractions were getting worse.

“I know. The people can assist by tossing stones at the enemies from the top... but the court is made up of stubborn folk. We will bring it up again in the next council meeting.” He said smiling at her

“What you need to focus on for now is the baby, leave defending the city to me” he said as he embraced her. Hugging him always gave her so much comfort, she always felt safer in his embrace, but she knew she had to share her comfort with the rest of the village, “Go protect the city, I will focus on our baby” she said, breaking away from the embrace. She closed her eyes and squeezed his hand back.

As she opened her eyes, Ogundele entered the hut.

He bowed “Asiko ti to” (It is time), he said. Ajanaku looked back at Abebi, as if waiting for her to formally release him to his duties. She nodded, and replied “They need you.”

Ajananku stood up feeling much better about what he had to do. Protecting the village no longer felt like a tough decision, but it did not feel like the right one either. As he began to leave, she grabbed his hand again and put

her protection charm in his hand.

He looked at his hand and shook his head “You know I cannot take this, I cannot leave my family unprotected while I seek safety on the battlefield. This is not my first battle, I will be fine.” He said, as he put the charm back into her hand and squeezed it firmly. “I will return to you, that is my promise.” he said, then, he exited the hut.

Abebi went into labor a few moments after the first wave of attackers hit. As her labor pain intensified, she felt a wave of fear. Ajanaku was not here, this might be their last days alive. Through the pain and tears, she sings a song, heralding her child as he is born:

*Atinu ife labe osupa ladun aye obi ti wa  
Irawo tutun, irawo mi, lati inu ekun ati eje.  
Oju n ro mi, fun baba re to lo ja ogun wa.  
Ki o ti ogun de layo ati alafia, lagbara Ogun, mo bebe.*

*Ati iwo irawo mi, ton gun afefe ogun bo lati orun,  
So si yiye, ki o si mu ayo, itura ati itunu bo lati orun  
Iwo irawo mi, olufe mi, ayo mi, Abidogun.*

#### TRANSLATION:

*From within love under the moonlight do the joys of a parenthood emerge.  
A new star, my little star, emerging out of blood and tears.  
Oh, my eyes are teary and weary, for your father who has gone to battle.  
May he return from the battle safe and well, in the name of Ogun, I plead.*

*And you, my star, riding from heaven on the winds of battle,  
ride safely my star and bring with you joy, solace and comfort from heaven.*

And as the baby came forth, one of the midwives took the baby, and said joyfully, “It’s a baby boy”, and Abebi completed her song, with the following line,

*My star, my love, my joy, Abidogun (The one whose birth came with the war).*

When the child was delivered, a joyful presence entered the room. The stationed soldier, Ogundele, immediately ran off to the battlefield to inform Ajanaku of the news.

Back at the battlefield, the attackers were mounting a well coordinated attack. They attacked in waves, forcing an attrition style battle, while trying to goad the defenders into rushing into the forest. But the village defenders were also smart, only taking the defensive. The strategy employed by the village forces seemed to be working, as the waves of attackers were getting smaller and smaller.

As Ogundele surveyed the battlefield, he spotted Balogun Ajanaku’s command tent. From this vantage, Ajanaku deployed his men meticulously in organized teams of four. This formation, he devised alongside his wife. It consisted of a soldier with a large shield for protection, an archer for ranged attacks, and two infantry men, each specialized soldier capable of seamlessly switching duties with the next, resting a versatile and

formidable unit.

Jorobu quickly recognized the strategy and its effectiveness, and sought to disrupt the approach. He adjusted his antiques to match. Rather than confront Ajanaku's forces directly, he dispatched smaller, more agile squads to distract the main forces of Ajanaku, firing arrows at the feet of the shieldbearer. Simultaneously, he maneuvered the bulk of his troops through the forest launching a covert assault aimed at the village itself.

This strategic ploy forced the defenders to split their focus. With part of their forces chasing the enemies through the dense woods. The squads struggled to maintain formation. Ajanaku himself began to arm up to head into the battlefield when he saw Ogundele running towards his makeshift camp. His heart immediately sank.

“Was there an ambush? What went wrong?” Ajanaku bellowed across the camp.

“It’s a boy!” Ogundele burst out, his voice a mix of excitement and breathlessness.

Rather than relief, the news provoked Ajanaku's frustration. With a swift motion borne of anger and stress, Ajanaku slapped Ogundele across the cheek. “And why would you abandon your post just to come tell me that?” he thundered, his voice echoing the clash of steel and shouts from the battlefield.

Regaining his composure, Ajanaku turned to a Chief named Olugbade who

had a complicated relationship with Ajanaku. He had insisted on remaining in the military despite his high civic appointment which was similar to that of Ajanaku who was the Balogun. Their relationship was wrought with tension, but Ajanaku was desperate.

However, of all the people on that battlefield, he had the most experience, so, Ajanaku informed him what the new battle plan was, and began to run back to the village to check on his family. There were now more and more invaders running amok. He took down as many of the invaders as he could on his way.

As he hastened toward the hut, General Ajanaku was unaware that General Jorobu, his adversary, was silently observing him from the underbrush. Jorobu muttered to himself, "If I take out the General, this battle ends with him." With that resolve, Jorobu stealthily eliminated the squads guarding the periphery and shadowed Ajanaku as he entered the village, concealing himself within the foliage.

As Ajanaku approached the hut, the sound of crying pierced the air. His heart raced, fearing the worst. But as he entered, a different scene unfolded before his eyes. His wife, Abebi, was still in labor, her face contorted with effort and pain.

He looked around the room in confusion, to his right, he spotted the first child being swaddled by one of the midwives—They were having twins.

"Ibeji!" (Twins!) he exclaimed, his face illuminated with joy as the midwives continued assisted Abebi with the delivery of the second child. The midwife swaddling the baby beckoned to him, offering him the swaddled infant.

With trembling hands, Ajanaku took the baby, cradling the fragile creature in his muscular arms. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he gazed upon his child's face. He experienced profound connection, unlike anything he had ever experienced, emotions surged through him. Emotions he had never felt before coursed through his body like a river breaking through a dam.

In the baby's eyes, he saw a glow that seemed to outshine the chaos surrounding them. He looked at the boy's mother, and without knowing that his mother had already named the boy, Ajanaku christened him "Abidogun." As the name left his lips, he drew the infant close to his chest, feeling a warmth spread through his entire being.

He looked back at Abebi, a smile playing on his lips, but she was lost in the throes of delivering their second child. The crown of the baby's head was visible now, a miracle unfolding before his eyes.

Abidogun stirred in his arms, his cries piercing the tense atmosphere. Instinctively, Ajanaku began to sway, pacing the small hut in an attempt to soothe his firstborn. As he neared the doorpost, the cool breeze seemed to calm the infant, his cries subsiding to soft whimpers.

Ajanaku turned back to witness the birth of his second child. The baby had finally arrived, and another midwife moved to swaddle the newborn. In that moment of pure joy, fate struck a cruel blow.

A sudden, sharp coldness lanced through Ajanaku's back, spreading into his stomach like ice water in his veins. The rival general had thrown a spear

into his back. His eyes widened in shock as he looked down to see a protrusion from his abdomen – the tip of a spear that had pierced him from behind.

The rival general's face, twisted with malice, appeared in the doorway. In an instant, the scene of new life transformed into one of brutal violence. Wailing and screaming enveloped the room as the midwives caught sight of the intruder and the spreading pool of Ajanaku's blood.

With inhuman speed, the general withdrew unsheathed his sword and fell the midwives one by one, their cries cut short by the merciless blade. Abidogun's wails rose once more, a thin line of blood appearing on his tiny arm where the sword had grazed him.

Despite the mortal wound, Ajanaku's paternal instinct surged. He gently placed Abidogun down and, with a strength born of desperation, he began to pull the spear through the hole in his abdomen, until most of the spear was in front of him, then, he snapped the protruding spear shaft. In one fluid motion, he turned and impaled the advancing general before he could reach Abebi.

With the last of his strength, Ajanaku gathered both babies in his arms. He slumped against the mud wall of the hut, his life force ebbing away. His gaze fell upon the enemy general, now a crumpled form bleeding out on the earthen floor, no longer a threat.

The babies' cries filled the air, a haunting chorus to the tragedy that had unfolded. As Ajanaku sat there, his life slipping away with each labored

breath, he drew his children close. With his final moments, he whispered a prayer into their tiny ears:

*Bi mo tin faye yi le fun Orun, mo si gbogbo ilekun ayo ati alubarika ti ese mi ti rin wo ri ni gbogbo aye mi. Mo si bebe, ki Orunmila ko yin logban, ki Ogun ko yin ni dida ati itara, Ki Sango si fun yin ni agbara.*

*Ni gbogbo aye yin, e ni s'irin, e o si ni si ese gbe, mo si be Esu, Esu, oluso àwọn ònà, láti dari yín ni gbogbo irin-ajo aye yín.*

*Mo tun was bere lowo Osun, ki o ko yin ni Ife ati suuru ti e ma fi bara lo ni ode aye.*

*Emi yo si ma wo yin lati oju orun ni gbogbo aye yin  
Eyin omo mi, Abidogun ati Abogunde.*

#### TRANSLATION:

*As I depart on my way out of this life, I leave open every door of joy and prosperity that my feet ever entered. May Orunmila grant you wisdom, and Ogun creativity and drive, Sango strength.*

*In all your days, may you never misstep or follow the wrong path in the road, for I implore Esu, the guardian of roads to guide you on all your journeys.*

*And I implore Osun to teach you the love and patience to deal with each other.  
I will be watching you from my place in the realm of the ancestors.*

*My sons, Abidogun and Abogunde (The one whose birth came during the war).*

As Ajanaku prayed, a movement caught Abebi's eyes. Jorobu, still alive, despite his grievous wound, pulled out the wooden horse, his fingers

tracing the intricate carvings on the horse. He clutched the horse and a tear ran down his cheek.

He stretched out his hand, then, he began to crawl towards Ajanaku.

Abebi, her body still aching from childbirth, found a reserve of strength she didn't know she possessed. In one fluid motion, she grasped Jorobu's discarded sword and brought it down on Jorobu's neck, beheading him with a single strike. The rival general's hand unclenched, and the wooden horse fell, quickly soaking in the expanding pool of blood.

Dropping the sword, Abebi limped back to the birthing mat, her movements sluggish but determined. She gathered the clean cloths the midwives had prepared for the birth, now to be used to staunch the flow of her husband's life. With agonizing steps, she returned to Ajanaku's side, pressing the fabric against his wounds with trembling hands.

The babies' cries, once a joyous announcement now seemed a beacon to attract more danger. Abebi's heart raced as she tried to quiet them, fear of attracting more soldiers adding to her distress. She gently took the second baby from Ajanaku's weakening grasp, wiping her finger clean before slipping it into the infant's mouth. As she rocked the child, Ajanaku mirrored her actions with their firstborn. She pushed the baby closer to Ajanaku's chest, and soon the babies stopped crying.

In the sudden quiet that followed, Ajanaku's voice, barely above a whisper, broke the silence. "Abogunde," he said, his eyes fixed on the baby in Abebi's arms.

"Abogunde," she repeated the name, tasting its sweetness even as silent tears began to fall. Her free hand never left Ajanaku's wound, as if she could hold his life in place through sheer will.

Ajanaku winced at the pressure. "Thank you..." he managed, sucking air through his teeth, the pain evident in every labored breath.

His gaze returned to the infants, a mixture of love and sorrow filling his eyes. "They are beautiful," he murmured, another tear tracing a path down his blood-smeared cheek. "I wish I had more time with them."

Abeki could only nod in response, her eyes bloodshot and vision blurring as tears welled up. Words failed her, the enormity of the moment—joy, sorrow, love, anger, fear, and impending loss—to overwhelming to voice.

Ajanaku's labored voice broke through, barely above a whisper. "I promised you... I would return... even if not for long." His words dissolved into a wheeze, prompting Abeki to grasp his arm tightly, as if her grip alone could anchor him to this world.

Ajanaku lifted his gaze, striving to meet Abeki's eyes. But through the haze of blood and tears, she could barely discern his features. She stared intently, mistakenly focusing on the wrong spot. With his remaining strength, Ajanaku leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek before his head lolled to the side, consciousness slipping away.

Panic surged through Abeki. She hastily wiped her eyes with a blood-stained cloth, desperate to clear her vision. Realizing what was happening, she gently placed the babies back on the mat and cupped Ajanaku's face in her hands. She shook him gently at first, then with

increasing urgency when he remained unresponsive. Ajanaku's eyes fluttered open, then they closed again.

She stopped shaking him and sharply tapped his right cheek with the back of her hand. He snapped back awake, and his eyelids parted lazily, his gaze unfocused, he looked into her eyes.

His lips moved, each word a monumental effort: "Watch... over... these children." With those final words, he drew his last breath, his head drooping to the right as life left his body.

Refusing to accept the finality of the moment, Abebi continued to jolt him, trying to wake him back up, but he was gone. She continued as if her persistence could somehow reverse the irreversible. The realization that she had become a widow in the span of a heartbeat was too much to bear. Her gentle giant, her protector and partner, was gone.

Anguish overtook her, twisting her insides with a pain that rivaled childbirth. She collapsed to the floor, rolling in the dirt and writhing in pain as silent wails wracked her body. Her tears seized her vision again, while the world outside continued its chaotic dance of violence, oblivious to her personal tragedy.

When her tears finally subsided and her vision cleared, she found herself face to face with her newborn twins. The sight of them brought a fresh wave of emotion. "This was supposed to be a joyful moment. Bayii ko lo se yę ki o ti şele!" (This is not how it should have happened!) she cried, fearing that the joy of their birth would forever be tainted by the tragedy of their father's death.

With trembling hands, she stood and gently closed Ajanaku's eyes, whispering a prayer over his still form. As the final words left her lips, the sound of a body falling outside the hut jolted her back to the present danger.

An Omi warrior had stumbled just beyond the threshold. In a surge of fury and survival instinct, Abebi seized the fallen spear and, with a strength born of grief and rage, plunged it into the soldier's eye.

Peering outside, she witnessed the brutal reality of their situation. The attackers were pillaging unchecked, cutting down fleeing civilians without mercy as they fled for their lives. It was clear that it was only a matter of time before they reached this hut.

Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her, but she returned her gaze back into the hut and the sight of her children and her husband gave her resolve. She wrapped her second child securely. Then, in a move that surprised even herself, she mounted the fallen general's severed head atop his own spear.

Carrying this macabre totem, Abebi stepped outside the hut. Her body still ached, and she was bleeding, physically and metaphorically—her heart bled from loss, but her spirit remained unbroken.

As Abebi emerged from the hut, she caught the eye of an approaching enemy soldier. He charged towards her, intent on attack, but the sight of his general's severed head atop the spear stopped him in his tracks. Horror and revulsion overtook him, and he crumpled to the ground, overcome by nausea.

A village defender, witnessing this startling turn of events, called out to his comrades while rushing to Abebi's aid. His eyes widened as he glanced inside the blood-stained hut, the full weight of the tragedy dawning on him. Turning back to Abebi, their gazes locked in a moment of unspoken understanding.

"I will protect them with my life," he vowed, his voice steady. Without hesitation, he entered the hut and carefully gathered the newborn twins. His voice rose above the chaos as he rallied every nearby soldier to their cause.

Another defender joined, a woman. The first defender handed one of the babies to her and faced Abebi again, saying "We. We will protect them with our lives." as a third defender joined.

Warriors converged around Abebi and the babies, forming a protective human fortress. Once certain of her children's safety at the heart of this impromptu platoon, Abebi pushed her way to the front. She raised the macabre standard high, a beacon of defiance and retribution.

As they advanced towards the battlefield, a chant arose from the throats of the defenders: "Woe betide any soldier of Omi that we meet along the way!" The streets cleared before them, enemy troops scattering in the face of their determination and the horrifying visage of their fallen leader.

The Omi forces, unaware of their general's fate until this moment, were seized by terror. Many fled into the forest, their will to fight evaporating. The emboldened village forces gave chase, dispatching those they caught

and securing an unlikely victory.

Amidst the chaos, a young man clad in black àdìre slipped unnoticed from a hut, disappearing into the forest. This prisoner, awaiting execution, found unexpected freedom in the chaos of battle. He was not seen by anyone.

As the sounds of conflict faded and victory settled over the village, Abebi felt the full weight of events crash upon her. Relief at their survival warred with the grief of her personal loss. Before the gathering crowd of civilians and soldiers, she cried out, her voice raw with emotion, "We should have been in the mountains!" With those words, she collapsed, overcome by tears and exhaustion.

Gentle hands bore Abebi back to her family compound as the community converged around the hut where Ajanaku had fallen. His brothers-in-arms retrieved his body with solemn reverence. As they carried him through the village, a wave of mourning swept through the people.

Men bowed their heads in respect, women's wails pierced the air, and even the children watched wide-eyed, their mothers did not bother to shield the eyes of their children. Elders shook their heads in sorrow, everyone felt the weight of a great loss

## **Chapter 3: Grief - The fate of Ekanem**

### ***The forest of Confusion I***

#### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem woke up startled, sitting up suddenly and banging his head against a root. He looked up and the sun shining down directly on him. The rays escaped through the roots of a dense mangrove root system. His heart was racing from the nightmare that ended his deep slumber.

In his dream, he was back in the mud, holding the soldier's weapon. The lifeless soldier rose from the mud, with a vengeful glare, and seized the weapon from him. The soldier began pursuing him, he ran, but with each step, his legs got heavier to carry, and he eventually slipped and fell, unable to get up, he woke up to the soldier striking him with the weapon.

Disoriented by the light, he closed his left eye and blocked the rays from his right eye with his hand. His arms hurt from exertion, and he was parched, his throat was dry, and grasped onto as much saliva as he could with every swallow.

'How did I end up here? I don't even remember sleeping off' he thought to himself, '*The boat must have drifted off and gotten stuck here when I slept off*'. The dense system felt like a cage, and there was no exit in sight.

He raised his head up, this time, cognizant of the roots, he began to look around, orienting himself. The water was murky, definitely not clean

enough to drink, the air was heavy with the smell of decaying leaves and the scent of the swamp. There were birds on the branches above. There was no easy escape, the only way out was up through the space between two stilts of root.

He pulled on one of the stilts to test its sturdiness, and it felt firm enough, so he climbed onto it, but as soon as he grabbed on with his full weight, the root snapped, and he fell back into the boat. This opened up more space for him to climb through. This time, he held onto two roots, pulled himself up, then wrapped his leg around one of them, and grabbed another one. He managed to climb out, and began grabbing the roots to make sure they were sturdy enough to hold his weight, then, he would place his leg on it, and move to the next root. Some were slippery, others were rough. His arms hurt really bad, but he had to endure until he finally made his way to land.

He finally emerged from between the mangroves and stepped on the damp earth of the forest floor. He took his first step, and his foot disappeared into the swampy earth, but he found his footing, and with each step, the ground became firmer.

The ground was covered with vegetation, and the forest felt alive, the stench had subsided, insects were buzzing, birds were chirping, and leaves rustled in the gentle breeze.

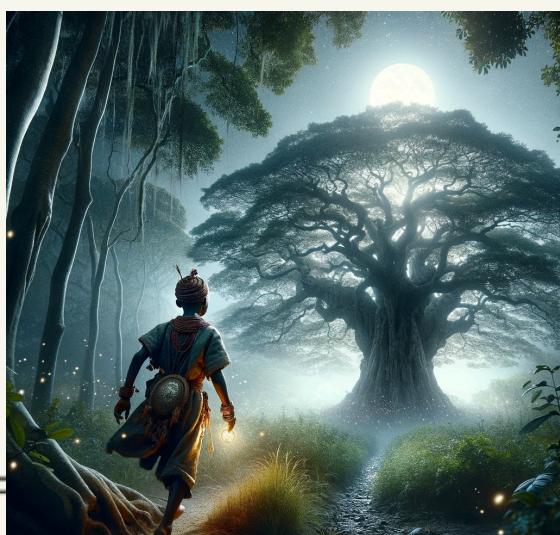
The boy had never ventured far into any forests alone before, he was always close by to his mother, and at this moment, he broke down, unable to venture any further. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the amulet, a

reminder of his grief. His heart a storm of emotions - anger, loneliness, pain, his breath got heavy, and he threw the amulet into the water, then, he fell to the ground and cried himself to sleep.

When he awoke, the moon was out, fireflies littered the forest floor, and crickets sang a symphony, the air was also fresher and cooler than it was earlier. He sat up, rubbing his eyes of sleep and residue of his dried tears. In front of him, fireflies surrounded an item in a perfect circle, he was not sure what it was, so, he ventured closer, and to his surprise, the amulet he had thrown away was right there in front of him.

He picked up the amulet, and the fireflies followed. As he ventured deeper into the forest, the moonlight shone across the forest floor, and the fireflies guided him, leading him through the landscape that was so unfamiliar earlier.

He followed the fireflies until he found himself at a clearing in the forest. At the center of the clearing was a single giant iroko tree standing majestically against the backdrop of the night sky and moonlight. The air was vibrant and more fireflies flickered around the tree, and the crickets chirped endlessly.



## ***The Wandering City of Sorceries (Ajo Ala)***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem stood before the majestic Iroko tree (Odum in Twi), its gnarled trunk stretching impossibly high into the night sky. The sight stirred memories of his mother's stories, as though he had been transported into one of them.

"Odo," he could almost hear Boah say, "...the Odum tree is more than just a tree. It's a bridge between our world and the realm of spirits. Avoid people that sit around Iroko trees."

A lump formed in Ekanem's throat. How long had it been since he'd heard her voice outside of his memories? It had been many days since that terrible night.

*'The land of the spirits,'* he thought to himself. *'Maybe I can find mama there... I can journey like Anansi.'* he contemplated as he walked around the tree.

His contemplation was interrupted by a shimmering wall of fog that materialized before him, as he rounded the tree. Its ethereal tendrils reaching out as if beckoning him closer. The amulet in his palm pulsed, its rhythm matching the ebb and flow of the mist.

'What is this place?' he wondered, a feeling of unease washed over him. He took a step back. *'Don't go touching things you don't understand, the forest is not a place for the curious.'* his mother would warn whenever he got too enthusiastic. Ekanem imagined his mother's advice would apply to strange fog walls as well.

But his instincts suggested otherwise. The amulet's pull was strong, and he couldn't really turn back now, he was now far from shore and wouldn't know where to go.

He closed his eyes and said his mother's prayer to Nyame, "Nyame, kyere me kwan na bo me ho ban" (Nyame, guide and protect me).

He then opened his eyes and clutched the amulet, "kyere me kwan," Ekanem whispered, the Twi phrase a talisman against his fear. Show me my path.

He took a deep breath and stepped forward, before he could take the next step, the fog advanced and enveloped him. When this happened, he screamed and tried to run back out of the fog, but there was fog in all directions as far as he could see.

The air in the fog was charged with energy. The power flowed through and prickled his skin, raising goosebumps along his arms. The mist swirled, thickening until he could barely see anything, then he began to hear whispers, one voice, two, three, until he lost count.

The voices were not hostile though, it was as though they were telling him where to go. As he began to follow the voices, a path formed in the fog, and at the end of the foggy path was a wall of vines.

He walked cautiously towards the vines, and as he did, the amulet began to pulsate harder, he raised the amulet and pointed it towards the vines. When he did, the vines pathed. Ekanem blinked, his jaw dropped in awe of the sight before him.

Other than the fact that it was daytime, the first thing he noticed was the air, it smelled almost sweet, but it left a slightly bitter aftertaste at the back of your throat until you took another breath.

A city unlike any he had ever seen sprawled out beneath him. Buildings of impossible shapes rose into the sky, their surfaces alive with moving patterns, geometric shapes in vibrant colors that seemed to dance in the strange, shimmering light.

There was no light source in the sky here, no moon, no sun, no stars, it was as though everything generated its own light, but you couldn't make out where the light was coming from.

Ekanem took a tentative step forward, then another. The ground beneath his feet felt solid, yet there was an odd give to it, as if he were walking on the surface of a still pond. He could sense unseen presences all around him, watching his every move. The air thrummed with tension, a mixture of wonder and wariness that set his nerves on edge.

Suddenly, the amulet's pulsing stopped. The abrupt silence sent a jolt of panic through Ekanem's body. He clutched at the stone, its surface now cool and lifeless against his skin.

"Nyame, kyere me kwan na bo me ho ban," he whispered.

As the words left his lips, Ekanem heard a chilling shrieking sound that seemed to come from all around. He immediately turned around, but the doorway of vines was now gone, replaced by a massive lake.

He immediately turned forward, but instead of the lush beautiful city he had just seen, there was now a thick dark forest. He knew how to swim, but he could not see the other side of the lake. He had never swam in water that massive before.

He heard the shrieking sound again, this time from his left. When he turned to look, he saw a hairy, bat-like creature with large blood-shot eyes, long legs, feet that point both ways, sharp claws and teeth, horns. It had the body of a large chimpanzee.

"Sasabonsam," Ekanem whispered in terror, recognizing the forest monster from his mother's tales. He broke into a sprint.

The creature lunged forward, its claws raking the air where Ekanem had been standing just moments before. He turned and ran, weaving between the strange buildings, desperately searching for a way out of this nightmare city.

As he ran, Ekanem heard a small voice, barely audible above the monster's roars and the pounding of his own heart.

"This way, child of two lands," the voice whispered. "Follow my guidance."

Without thinking, Ekanem obeyed, turning left at the next intersection. The voice continued to direct him, always just ahead, always just out of sight.

"Right now. Quickly!"

Ekanem darted right, hearing the Sasabonsam crash into a tree behind him.

"There's a hole ahead. Don't be afraid. Jump!"

Ekanem saw the yawning darkness before him and hesitated for a split second. But the monster's roar spurred him on, and he leapt into the void, he felt a sharp tug from beneath his feet.

The world tilted, and he was falling, tumbling through darkness. He cried out, arms flailing for purchase, finding nothing but empty air. As he fell, the small voice spoke again, closer now. "You're safe, Ekanem. I've got you."

Then, impact. Soft, but sudden enough to drive the breath from his lungs. Ekanem's heart was pounding so hard, he could hear it like the village drums.

He rose really fast, but got dizzy. He stood still for a moment, he darted around looking for the monster, but he could barely see. He sat back down, eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the dizziness to subside. When he finally dared to look, he found himself in a dimly lit space. His eyes darted up, he half expected the Sanbonsam to pounce on him, but this place seemed to have no ceiling. It seemed to extend upwards forever.

"You are safe here. Where are your traveling companions?" a disembodied voice questioned.

The high-pitched voice startled Ekanem. He sat up quickly, wincing at the lingering ache in his body, then, found himself face to face with a toddler. The child skipped around him with uncanny grace, giggling as if this were all some grand game. It finally came to a stop in front of Ekanem.

The child had wild, curly hair that framed a face of indeterminate age, adorned with colorful beads that seemed to glow with their own inner light.

The toddler's eyes, far too ancient for such a youthful face, fixed on Ekanem with an intensity that made him shiver.

When the child spoke, its voice was a melody of wind chimes and rustling leaves, at once soothing and unsettling.

"What... what traveling companions?" Ekanem managed to stammer out.

The toddler's laughter abruptly ceased. "Ahh, it's not yet time for you to be here," the child said, head tilting to one side in a decidedly un-childlike manner. "Is it the amulet? Ahh, it got the homing call. Let me see."

Instinctively, Ekanem's hand went to the amulet, clutching it protectively. A host of his mother's seemingly endless stories of trickster spirits replayed in his memory.

But before he could react further, the amulet seemed to come alive in his grasp. It wriggled like a living thing, forcing its way through his fingers and floating towards the toddler's outstretched hand.

Ekanem watched, heart pounding, as the child examined the amulet, murmuring words in a language he didn't understand. After what felt like an eternity, the child stopped, then pulled out a red rope from his robe and attached it to the amulet. The toddler nodded and the amulet floated back to Ekanem, now hanging on his neck.

"You have lost weight," the toddler observed, sudden concern creasing that young face. From nowhere, the child produced a large wrap. "Here, eat this whenever you're hungry. As long as you don't finish it in one sitting, every time you reopen the wrap, it will be whole again."

Ekanem stared at the offering. It looked like Eko, the steamed cornmeal pudding his mother used to make. His stomach growled, reminding him how long it had been since he'd eaten properly. '*Never accept food from strangers*', his mother used to warn. '*It always came with a price*'. Not especially when the stranger was clearly a spirit.

"Where is this?" Ekanem asked, hoping to delay the choice. "Who are you?"

The toddler shook its head, "Now is not the time for questions. Just follow my instructions."

The toddler's gaze softened, a flicker of understanding passing across its face.

"I know you're afraid, child of two lands," the toddler said.

"Why do you call me child of two lands?" Ekanem questioned. The child laughed, "Curious, I like that... but this food is a gift, not a trap. You'll need your strength for what lies ahead."

Slowly, Ekanem reached out and took the wrap. The familiar scent of Eko wafted up, bringing unbidden tears to his eyes. It smelled just like his mother's cooking.

"Thank you," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

The toddler nodded, then pointed to a shimmering doorway that hadn't been there a moment before.

"Follow the fireflies. Do NOT under any circumstances look away from the path they create, and if you hear anybody talk to you or try to get your attention, do not under any circumstances reply to them on your way out."

Ekanem swallowed hard, clutching the wrap of Eko to his chest. "What will happen if I do?"

"You'll be lost," the toddler said simply. "And I won't be able to help you find your way back."

The gravity of the situation settled over Ekanem like a heavy cloak. He nodded, committing the instructions to memory.

"When you make it out, you will face some tribulations, I will send you help whenever I can" the toddler continued.

"Remain patient, you will find your way. The wrap of eko will never finish, as long as you never finish it in one sitting. Make sure to feed your companions when you meet them."

"Companions?" Ekanem asked, confusion furrowing his brow. "But I'm alone—"

"Not yet," the toddler interrupted with a knowing smile. "But you won't be for long. Now go, and don't forget to take a change of clothes. You'll need them."

Before Ekanem could ask any more questions, the toddler pointed to a pile of neatly folded garments that had appeared in the corner. With trembling hands, Ekanem gathered them up, tucking them under his arm alongside the Eko.

Taking a deep breath, Ekanem stepped through the shimmering doorway. Immediately, a swarm of fireflies surrounded him, their gentle light forming a clear path through the swirling mists that had reappeared.

## ***The forest of Confusion II***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem began to walk, focusing intently on the illuminated trail before him. The mist was back again. It shifted and churned around him, occasionally parting to reveal fleeting glimpses of strange landscapes and shadowy figures. Whispers tickled at the edges of his hearing, not as friendly this time. Some were enticing, others threatening, but Ekanem pressed on, remembering the toddler's warning.

The path wound on, seeming to stretch endlessly. Ekanem's legs began to ache, and sweat beaded on his brow despite the cool mist. Just as he was beginning to wonder if he would ever reach the end, a painfully familiar voice cut through the air.

"Ekanem? Odo, where are you?"

Ekanem's heart leapt into his throat. It was his mother's voice, as clear as if she were standing right beside him. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to turn, to run to her, to throw himself into her arms.

"Odo, please! Help me! I need you to help me out of here!"

Tears streamed down Ekanem's face as he forced himself to keep moving forward, his eyes locked on the fireflies' path. "It's not real," he whispered to himself, his voice breaking. "It's not her. It can't be her."

The voice grew more insistent, more desperate. "Ekanem! Why won't you look at me? Don't you love me anymore?"

A sob tore from Ekanem's throat. "Kyerε me kwan, Nyame, gye me" he chanted through his tears, clinging to the amulet. "Show me my path. Nyame, save me."

Suddenly, his mother's voice changed, becoming the urgent whisper he'd heard on that terrible night. "Run... Odo, run!"

Instinct took over. Ekanem ran, his feet pounding against the misty ground, the fireflies streaking ahead of him like shooting stars. The voices and whispers rose to a crescendo around him, a storm of sound and fury that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

Then, abruptly, silence fell. Ekanem felt the sensation of falling once more, his stomach lurching as the world spun around him. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for impact.

When he opened them again, he found himself lying on damp earth, the scent of the forest thick in his nostrils. The ethereal city and the misty path were gone. He was back in the forest he had found the Iroko tree, but in a part of the forest he didn't recognize.

Slowly, Ekanem sat up, his body aching from the ordeal. The wrap of Eko was still clutched tightly in his hand, the change of clothes tucked securely

under his arm. The amulet hung heavy around his neck, a comforting weight against his chest.

Hunger gnawed at his insides, and Ekanem carefully unwrapped the Eko. Its familiar scent brought fresh tears to his eyes, memories of his mother flooding his mind. As he took his first bite, savoring the taste of home, he allowed himself a moment to grieve.

But only a moment. As he chewed, Ekanem's eyes scanned his surroundings, alert for any sign of danger. The forest seemed different here – while he was away from the mysterious city, he had an inkling he was not free from danger yet.

In the distance, barely visible through the dense foliage, he spotted what looked like an old hut. Smoke rose from behind it, a thin tendril curling up into the canopy above.

Ekanem swallowed his mouthful of Eko, carefully rewrapping the rest. He began to head towards the hut. Perhaps, this was where he would find his companions.

## ***Urona's Hut***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem cautiously approached the raggedy, dilapidated hut, staying close to the bushes for cover. This did not seem like any hut he had ever seen. His heart began to pound again in his chest, he had hoped this would lead him back to civilization.

As he got closer, he realized the hut seemed to be abandoned. He noticed smoke lazily curling upwards from behind it. A strange mix of herbs and something acrid wafted from the smoke, making his nose wrinkle.

Suddenly, a loud cackle broke the silence. Ekanem jumped, his breath catching in his throat as a chicken burst from the bushes near the hut. But this was no ordinary chicken.

Its feathers were pitch black, gleaming with an oily sheen in the dappled sunlight. Instead of claws, it had paws with sharp, curved talons that dug into the earth. Most terrifying of all, its beak was lined with rows of pointed teeth.

The chicken locked eyes with Ekanem, and for a heartbeat, neither moved. Ekanem felt a cold sweat run down his back to his buttcrack, then a sudden itch. He slowly reached to scratch when, with another ear-splitting cackle, the chicken vanished back into the undergrowth.

Panic surged through Ekanem. He scrambled backward, leaves and twigs crunching under his feet as he retreated. In his haste, he stumbled into a clearing opposite his hiding spot.

A sound from the direction of the hut made him freeze. The door creaked open, and a figure emerged, clothed in a black robe that seemed to absorb the very light around it. The figure's head turned, scanning the forest, and though Ekanem couldn't see its face, he felt the weight of its gaze upon him.

Without thinking, Ekanem ran. He crashed through the underbrush, branches whipping at his face and arms as he fled. Behind him, he could hear the rustling of pursuit—the dark-robed figure giving chase.

Ekanem's lungs burned as he ran, fear giving him speed he didn't know he possessed. He darted between trees, leaped over fallen logs, his mother's last words to him echoing in his mind: "Run... Odo, Run!"

As he rounded a massive tree, Ekanem spotted a large, gnarled root system creating a small hollow. Without hesitation, he dove into the space, pressing himself against the damp earth and holding his breath.

The sound of pursuit grew closer. Ekanem squeezed his eyes shut, one hand clutching the amulet, the other pressed against his mouth to stifle his ragged breathing. Please, he prayed silently, please don't let it find me.

Footsteps approached, slow and deliberate. They paused near Ekanem's hiding place, and he could hear the rustle of fabric as the figure moved. For what felt like an eternity, there was silence.

Then, the chicken's cackle split the air, this time from somewhere in the distance. The footsteps moved away, following the sound, and gradually faded into the forest.

Ekanem remained frozen in his hiding spot, afraid to move, afraid to even breathe too loudly. Slowly, he opened his eyes, blinking in the dim light filtering through the roots. That's when he saw it. The chicken was there, mere inches from his face, its teeth-lined beak grinning at him in a grotesque parody of a smile.

Ekanem bit back a scream, scrambling backwards out of the hollow. He stumbled to his feet, ready to run again, but when he looked back, the chicken was gone. The forest around him was silent once more, as if nothing had happened. Then, the chicken cackled loudly again, and the dark robed figure began dashing in his direction.

Breathing heavily, Ekanem scanned his surroundings. In the distance, he spotted what looked like a clearing. At its edge, he could make out a line of logs covered in strange symbols and charms. Some part of him recognized it as a boundary—a demarcation between one territory and another.

Ekanem hesitated. To cross that line would mean stepping into the unknown, possibly into even greater danger. But to stay here, with the dark-robed figure and the terrifying chicken-creature...

Taking a deep breath, Ekanem started towards the boundary. Whatever lay beyond couldn't be worse than what he was leaving behind. Or so he hoped.

He rounded the corner and hid behind another tree. He looked from behind the tree to see if the figure had followed in this direction. Suddenly, a hand

clamped over his mouth from behind, another arm wrapping around his chest, pinning his arms to his sides. Ekanem tried to scream, to struggle, but the grip was like iron.

"Shh..." a hoarse voice hissed in his ear, "...unless you want Urona to find you."

While terrified, he was at least thankful that someone was saving him from the monstrous adiye-irana. Whether this stranger was a new friend or foe, was a bridge he was only willing to cross later.

## ***Urona the uncrossing***

Ekanem's heart raced as he was dragged backwards, his feet scrabbling against the forest floor. The iron grip around his chest tightened, making it difficult to breathe. He tried to turn his head, to catch a glimpse of his captor, but the hand over his mouth held firm.

The forest blurred around them as they moved swiftly and silently through the underbrush. Ekanem's mind raced, torn between terror of this unknown assailant and relief at being pulled away from the dark-robed figure and the terrifying chicken-creature.

Suddenly, they stopped. Ekanem heard the creak of a door, and then he was thrust into darkness. The hands released him, and he stumbled forward, gasping for air. He spun around, ready to face his captor, but saw only blackness.

"Who are you?" Ekanem demanded, his voice shaking despite his attempt at bravery. "What do you want with me?"

Silence answered him. Then, a soft shuffling sound. Ekanem tensed, straining his eyes against the darkness. A spark flared, and suddenly, a small fire blazed to life in a crude fireplace, illuminating the space around him.

He was in a hut, smaller and more dilapidated than the one he'd seen earlier. Baskets and gourds hung from the ceiling, and strange symbols

were carved into the walls. The air was heavy with the scent of herbs and smoke.

And there, standing by the fireplace, was a woman. She was tall, draped in a grey robe that seemed to shimmer in the firelight. But it was her eyes that shocked Ekanem, he had never seen anything like it before. They were entirely white, pupil-less, staring sightlessly in his direction.

She began to speak, but Ekanem had no idea what she was saying. It was a foreign language to him. She stopped, grunted, then, she began to speak again, this time, it was as though she was speaking a different language, but Ekanem still did not understand what she was saying.

She moved some wooden boxes around and then lunged towards him but she didn't use her eyes, she was clearly blind. But for someone who couldn't see, she with surprising grace. Ekanem backed away until he felt the rough wall of the hut behind him.

"I- I'm sorry - I got lost! Our village was attacked." he blurted out

The blind woman's face softened slightly. She reached out, her hand unerringly finding a basket hanging nearby. From it, she withdrew a collection of gourds.

She held the basket out to Ekanem and gestured for him to pick one.

Hesitantly, Ekanem approached. The gourds varied in size, some larger than any he'd seen before, others impossibly small. But in the center was one that seemed to call to him. Without fully understanding why, he reached out and took it.

A smile flickered across the woman's face. She murmured some words (Good choice). She took the gourd from him, uncorked it, and took a swift swig. Then, without warning, she grabbed Ekanem's chin and poured some of the liquid into his mouth.

The taste was indescribable - bitter and sweet, burning and cooling all at once. Ekanem coughed and spluttered, but the woman held firm until he swallowed.

Immediately, after she let go of him, his ears popped. The world seemed to shift around him, colors becoming more vivid, sounds more clear. He could hear the crackling of the fire, the whisper of wind outside the hut, and... something else. A faint, rhythmic thumping that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

"Boy-child of sorrow," the woman spoke, her voice raspy yet somehow melodious, "why do you wander where shamans fear to tread?"

Ekanem swallowed hard, his mouth dry. "I... I didn't mean to. I'm lost."

The blind woman tilted her head, as if listening to something Ekanem couldn't hear. "Lost? No. Sought, perhaps. Hunted, certainly. But not lost."

"What are you looking for in these forests, child?" she asked, her unseeing eyes seeming to pierce right through him.

Ekanem opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. What was he looking for? Safety? A way home? His mother?

The woman's expression hardened. "Speak up, or I send you back outside to face Urona!"

The threat of being sent back outside, to face whatever horrors awaited him there, loosened Ekanem's tongue. "I got lost!" he blurted out. "My village was attacked, my mother..." His voice broke, the grief he'd been holding back threatening to overwhelm him.

"What..." Ekanem started to ask, but the woman cut him off.

"You went and disturbed Urona's chicken. What were you looking for at the hut? You are lucky I found you." She laughed, a harsh, cackling sound that made Ekanem flinch.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, her laughter stopped. Her blind eyes seemed to focus on him with unnerving intensity.

"Listen well, boy-child," she said, her voice low and urgent. "Once you see the hut, the chicken will continue to alert the owner every time you open

your eyes in a place of hiding within the forest. This is the only place where you are safe. Urona is not to be trifled with!"

She reached out, her fingers brushing against the amulet at Ekanem's neck. "You carry old magic with you. Where did you find this? You have been to Ajo-Ala, the city of sorceries and spirits?"

Ekanem nodded, then remembered she couldn't see. "Yes," he said softly. "How did you know?"

The blind woman smiled, a secretive, knowing expression. "I know many things, child. The question is, what will you do with what you learn here?"

Before Ekanem could respond, the cackling of the chicken had begun again, at the door. The chicken then charged into the door as if it was trying to break it down. A loud, inhuman shriek followed, piercing the air outside. The blind woman's head snapped towards the sound, her expression grim.

The woman stood up and grabbed the skull of a bird from the shrine in the corner. She put the skull to her mouth and blew hard. A maddening low pitched noise erupted from the skull. The chicken shrieked and ran off into the night. Ekanem covered his ears.

The old woman blew for what felt like an eternity, at some point, her ears began to bleed, and by the time she stopped, Ekanem looked at his hands to see the old woman's ears were not the only ones that bled.

After the whistling had stopped, he noticed, the forest had become completely quiet.

The silence that followed the old woman's actions was deafening. Ekanem's ears rang, the absence of sound almost as painful as the piercing whistle had been. He watched, wide-eyed, as a single tear traced its way down the blind woman's wrinkled cheek.

"Your... sister?" Ekanem managed to croak, his voice hoarse.

The old woman nodded slowly, her unseeing eyes fixed on some distant point. "Urona and I... we were not always as we are now. But that is a tale for another time, perhaps."

She turned her face towards Ekanem, and despite her blindness, he felt as though she could see right through him. "You have questions, child. Ask them now, while we have this moment of peace."

Ekanem's mind raced. He had so many questions, he hardly knew where to begin. But one pressed forward, urgent and insistent.

"The amulet," he said, his hand moving to touch the warm stone at his throat. "You said it was old magic. What does that mean? And how... how is it connected to Ajo-Ala?"

The old woman's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "Ah, the amulet. It is to each person, in each moment a different thing, child." she said as she sat back down.

"A key, a bridge between worlds, a seal of protection, a guide. It has saved you many times, it has brought you to Ajo-Ala because that is part of its purpose - to guide those who are lost to where they need to be."

She reached out, her gnarled fingers hovering just above the amulet without touching it. "But that doesn't really answer the question of its form, just its function... what it really is, is a fragment of something greater, something ancient and powerful. Something that both Urona and I sought for... a very long time."

Ekanem swallowed hard, his throat dry. "What is it a fragment of?"

The old woman's unseeing eyes seemed to gleam in the firelight. "That, child, is the question that has driven my sister to madness. It is the reason she hunts, the reason she sends her abominations to search the forests. And now, it is the reason she hunts you."

"Go now," she urged. "And may the spirits of both your lands watch over you."

With a deep breath, Ekanem nodded. He tucked the pouch of herbs into his clothes, checked that the amulet was secure around his neck, and turned towards the door. As he placed his hand on the rough wood, he paused, looking back at the blind woman.

"Thank you," he said softly. "I... I don't even know your name."

The old woman's lips curved into a mysterious smile. "Names have power, child. Perhaps, if our paths cross again after this ordeal, you will have earned the right to know mine."

"Urona is my duty, and keeping you safe is my duty. You should spend the night." she reached into one of the wooden boxes and brought out an old mat and tattered wrapper.

For the first time since he left his village, Ekanem felt a semblance of his former life. Despite his reservations about his village and its people, he deeply missed it, but most importantly he missed his mother. There was no bedtime story for him tonight, he had a hard time falling asleep.

## **Lore Notes - The Dead Story of an Undead Maiden**

*I once spoke about my duty as the guardian of the graveyard of dead stories, tales that have breathed their last, stories that have been told for the last time. What I neglected to mention was that some stories fade into the abyss even before their subjects themselves draw their final breath.*

*Some tales slip into oblivion because memories of them fade, other times because they are so tragic that no one ever wants to remember them ever again. Others... others I have personally buried deep because of how it makes me feel. Yes, feel, I feel things, I am not immune to the weight of the tales I keep.*

*Abeni embarked on a long journey before she ended at those miserable backwaters that claimed her life. Her actions during that journey would directly and indirectly shape not only her fate but the fates of many others. One day, I'll unfurl the full tapestry of her journeys.*

*It was in the village of Uwuro that three lives intersected: Abeni, the traveler; Urona, the witch; and a prince whose name has long since been lost to time. Urona was the first to arrive here.*

*She was a young promising sorcerer and an agent of minor, harmless mischiefs, she held a special place in my heart, but you see, I have no means of directly influencing the stories I observe, that's an ability I did not receive from Nyame.*

*Urona had escaped the tutelage of her elder sister because she had been reprimanded for dabbling in what her sister called forbidden sorceries. Urona was*

*under the impression that no sorceries should be forbidden if they as long as they were done to help people*

*She arrived with eyes bright with the curiosity of a wanderer, her hands crackling with power she had yet to fully understand. On her first night, she managed to calm a storm, on her second day, a small crowd had gathered to seek her help, and she helped every single one of them, most notably, curing a child of a persistent fever that the local healers had failed to heal.*

*In comes the second party in this story, the young prince, afflicted with [...], word reached the ears of the Queen, and late that night, the King's guards came to Urona's tent and took her into the palace. Here, she met with the Queen and attempted to heal the prince. She gave the mother a mixture of herbs.*

*On the third night of her stay, a scream pierced the dark of the night, coming from the direction of the palace, death had come for the prince, swift and merciless. That night, the guards seized Urona once again, this time, as a prisoner.*

*And then, as if pulled by the strings of fate, the final lifeline in this intersection, Abeni arrived in the middle of this tragedy. She came to Uwuro the day after the prince's death, her feet dusty from long travels. Little did she know that her arrival would set in motion a chain of events that would haunt her for the rest of her days.*

*The village was a cauldron of grief and anger when Abeni arrived. The air thick with the scent of mourning herbs and the bitter tang of suspicion. As she walked through the marketplace, whispers reached her ears - talk of a witch, of dark magic, of a beloved prince struck down in his prime.*

*Abeni, curious began to speak to various villagers, she even spoke to a maid that worked in the palace. The more she heard, the clearer it became to Abeni that the prince had simply died of an incurable illness known to her as iba ajá. Abeni had seen it before, she recognized the symptoms, the high fever, the delirium, and the final silence that marked its end, regardless of medicine or magic.*

*The knowledge sat heavy on her tongue, and for a moment, just a moment, she opened her mouth to speak. But fear, that insidious serpent, coiled around her throat and choked the words before they could escape.*

*The endless of accusations, the fingers pointed at healers she had seen in the past, and the anger she saw in the people. So, Abeni held her tongue, carrying the weight of her silence like a stone in her belly.*

*Oh, how I wished I could have whispered in her ear, urged her to speak up.*

*And so, the tragedy unfolded. Urona had her eyes already plucked from their sockets, her body broken by torture, was brought before the grieving King and Queen. They demanded the impossible - to bring back their son from the realm of the dead.*

*Abeni had seen many dark rituals in her time, dear listener, but the one Urona performed that day... it sent chills down her spine. The price of such magic is always steep, and Urona paid it in full.*

*When she had completed the ritual, the prince drew breath once more, but Urona's life force ebbed away, leaving behind a shell filled with nothing but pain and vengeance.*

*As she drew her last breath, the villagers celebrated. Abeni watched it all, her silence a scream trapped behind her teeth. The King declared that her body be burned.*

*The villagers tried to dispose of her body to no avail, the fires did nothing to her flesh, only dying out everytime it was reignited. They began trying to chop her apart when Abeni finally found her voice.*

*Perhaps it was guilt, perhaps a desperate attempt at redemption. She offered to bury Urona according to the customs of her own people, saying perhaps she would be able to help Urona cross to the other side. At this point, the King had began to become afraid, so, he agreed to let her do it.*

*But ah, the irony of good intentions. Out of Urona's belongings was a black chicken, Abeni used this chicken as the Adiye-Irana, the sacrificial chicken used by the Yoruba to bury their dead. Unbeknowest to her, this chicken had been used by Urona in a ritual.*

*The chicken used in the burial rite became a vessel for Urona's vengeful spirit. As Abeni completed the ritual, the bird arose, its eyes gleaming with an unholy light, it had been transformed into a grotesque version of itself. It fled into the village, and behind it... behind it came Urona's reanimated corpse, blind eyes weeping blood, hands outstretched in fury.*

*The chicken found the King where he was hiding and Urona entered the palace, unable to be stopped, she took the King's eyes and then killed him. She was the last thing any of her victims ever saw.*

*For seven days and seven nights, terror reigned in Uwuro. On the third day, driven by guilt and a desperate need to right her wrong, Abeni set out to find Urona's sister. It was a journey fraught with danger, each step haunted by guilt.*

*On the 7th day, after Abeni had relayed the tragedy to Urona's sister. Her sister went into the forest and returned with the skull of a strange bird. That skull was what she used to scare Urona off the streets, she then spent the next 3 days attempting to capture Urona's vengeful body and the chicken. It was during this time that the elder sister also lost her eyesight.*

*After she had successfully done this, she moved into this forest where she has used various magics to keep her sister isolated to the hut. As long as no one goes by the hut and is seen by the chicken, Urona generally stays by the hut, held back by her sister's magic.*

### ***The Hidden Trails***

#### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem dreaming was hijacked by the enticing aroma of boiled yams and palm oil wafting through the hut. He opened his eyes to a warm meal of boiled yams and salted palm-oil. Ravenous, Ekanem dug into the yams, savoring the comforting flavors that reminded him achingly of Boah's cooking. He had finished two pieces of yams before he realized, the old woman was nowhere to be found.

Ekanem slowly opened the wooden door, scanning around the compound for any traces of the monstrous adiye-irana to come screeching out of the

shadows, but it was nowhere to be found, the yard was still quiet, except for the sound of leaves rustling.

He wandered to the back of the hut where he found two cleared paths leading into the forest. He heard water creaking down the leftmost path, so, he followed that path. There, he found the old lady.

As he rounded a bend in the path, he came upon the old woman crouched by a small stream. Before he could call out a greeting, her head snapped up, milky eyes locking onto him with an intensity that made him stumble back a step.

"What are you doing out here, you idiot child?" she snarled, her voice sharp as a whip crack.

Ekanem swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. "I...I didn't know where you went. I was looking for you..."

The old woman barked out a harsh laugh. "Looking for me? You're like a mewling kitten, helplessly latching on. It's a miracle you've survived this long. The depths of your foolishness!"

No one had ever spoken to Ekanem this way before. It hurt especially, coming from someone who reminded him so much of his mother.

She stood abruptly, her joints popping like twigs snapping. In two strides, she was nose to nose with Ekanem, her sour breath washing over his face. "Do you have a death wish, child? Or are you just too stupid to understand the dangers that lurk in these woods?"

Ekanem tried to take a step back, but the old woman's bony hand shot out, gripping his shoulder with surprising strength. Her milky eyes bored into his, and for a moment, Ekanem swore he could see the outline of a skull beneath her withered skin.

"Listen to me, child, the forest has no mercy for disobedient children that wander where they shouldn't, that is why you ended up here in the first place, isn't it?" she hissed through clenched teeth. "I am not here to coddle you. If you hope to survive this ordeal, you will listen to everything that I say. Do not leave the hut unless you are going with me!"

She shoved him back, the boy stumbled, barely keeping his footing. "You're weak, boy. Soft. The earth swallows those that cannot stand on it with their two feet."

Ekanem stood rooted to the spot, his cheeks burning with shame and anger. He wanted to shout back at the old crone, to tell her that he wasn't weak, that he had survived horrors she couldn't imagine. But the words stuck in his throat like bitter bile.

Silently, he turned and trudged back to the hut, the old woman's scathing words ringing in his ears. He would show her.

The woman was wrong about him. He had come this far alone, and when the time came to leave this wretched place, he would do it on his own terms, not hers.

He just needed to get past Urona. '*As soon as she got back, I'm going to tell her I am leaving!*' he said under his breathe, fisting the air and wondering if the old woman could hear him using her magic.

His wrist clenched into a fist, and he remembered the amulet. He looked at his chest and that was when he realized, the amulet was missing.

'*The old woman must have taken it!*' he thought. He immediately rushed back to the path behind him was empty, but when he got to the mouth of the trail, he heard the mournful whispering of the old woman. It was as though she was talking to someone. Ekanem returned to the hut where he found the amulet hanging above the mantelpiece.

## **Rituals in Moonlight**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

The old woman did not return to the hut until evening. The last hues of daylight were fading through the window of the hut.

"Good evening," she said softly. "I see you're still awake."

Ekanem managed a small nod. "Yes, ma'am."

She set the bushmeat down on a low wooden table and began unpacking a bundle of herbs and roots. "Come, sit with me," she invited, gesturing to the space beside her.

He hesitated but complied, moving to sit across from her. She seemed different—less the stern guardian and more like the elders he remembered from his village, those who shared stories by the fire.

"Have you ever prepared game before?" she asked, her hands deftly arranging the tools and ingredients.

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. My mother usually did the cooking."

The old woman smiled knowingly. "Well, it's high time you learned. You should learn to fend for yourself."

She guided his hands to the grasscutter, showing him where to make the initial cuts. "Firm but gentle," she instructed. "Respect the life that was given."

Her touch was surprisingly soft, and Ekanem felt a sense of calm wash over him. Together, they cleaned and quartered the meat, her hands moving with practiced precision despite her lack of sight.

"Your mother taught you well," she remarked as he handled the knife with growing confidence.

He felt a pang at the mention of his mother. "She taught me many things," he said quietly.

The old woman paused, her expression thoughtful. "She must have been a wise woman."

"She was," he replied, a hint of pride in his voice.

They worked in comfortable silence for a while. The rich aroma of roasting meat soon filled the hut, mingling with the earthy scent of the herbs. She prepared a swallow made from pounded yam and cocoyam—a dish unfamiliar to him.

"What's this?" he asked as she served the steaming mound alongside the meat.

"Something special," she said with a wink. "Try it."

He tore off a piece, dipping it into the savory sauce. The flavors danced on his tongue—spicy, earthy, and deeply satisfying. "It's delicious," he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up.

She chuckled softly. "I'm glad you like it. Food tastes better when shared, don't you think?"

He nodded enthusiastically, taking another bite.

As they ate, she leaned back slightly. "Would you like to hear a story?" she offered.

Ekanem's face brightened. "Yes, please."

She began, her voice low and melodic. "There was once a young weaver bird named Ozioma, who lived in a great baobab tree. She was the most talented of all the birds, crafting nests so intricate that they dazzled all who saw them. But Ozioma was never satisfied. She wanted to create a nest that touched the sky."

Ekanem listened intently, drawn into the tale.

"One day, she decided to build her nest higher than any bird had before. She wove and wove, climbing ever upward. The other birds warned her, 'Be careful, Ozioma. The wind is strong up there.' But she didn't listen. She was determined.

"As she neared the clouds, a great gust of wind came and tore her nest apart. Ozioma fell, her beautiful work scattered to the corners of the earth. She was heartbroken."

The old woman paused, her fingers tracing the rim of her bowl. "But as she sat grieving, she saw that her fallen pieces had become homes for other creatures—small animals and insects who needed shelter. She realized that her gift was not just for herself, but for all."

Ekanem considered the story, its layers of meaning unfolding in his mind. "So, she found happiness in helping others?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "She learned that true fulfillment comes from sharing our gifts, not hoarding them."

He pondered this, thinking of his own skills and what he had to offer. "I think I understand," he said softly.

She smiled gently. "I thought you might."

Night settled fully around them, the sounds of the forest shifting to the chorus of crickets and distant animal calls. The woman began clearing the remnants of their meal. "It's time to rest," she said. "We have much to do tomorrow."

Ekanem helped tidy up, then settled onto his mat. The hut was enveloped in darkness, the only light coming from the faint glow of dying embers. He closed his eyes, but sleep remained elusive. The stillness pressed in, and the unfamiliar surroundings stirred his unease.

He wanted to step outside for some air, but recalled the woman's stern warning: "Never leave the hut unless you are with me." But as the hours stretched on, the confines of the hut felt increasingly oppressive. Each creak of the wooden beams, each rustle outside, heightened his restlessness.

A soft sound broke through—the subtle shuffle of feet against the earthen floor. He opened his eyes to see the woman rising from her corner, her movements slow but deliberate. She wrapped a faded cloth around her shoulders, the same one she had worn earlier, and slipped quietly toward the entrance.

Curiosity sparked within him. Where could she be going in the dead of night? Remembering her earlier admonition, he knew he should stay put. But the memory of her story nudged at him. Perhaps there was more she wasn't telling him.

Making up his mind, Ekanem rose silently. If she had told him never to leave the hut unless he was with her, then surely following her meant he was obeying—at least in spirit. Barefoot and cautious, he stepped into the night.

The cool air greeted him, carrying the scent of damp earth and blooming night flowers. The moon hung high, casting an ethereal glow over the landscape. He spotted the woman moving toward the forest edge, her figure a shadow among shadows. She walked into the rightmost trail.

He trailed her at a distance, careful to keep his steps light. The forest canopy loomed overhead, the intertwined branches forming a lattice against the star-studded sky. She moved with an uncanny certainty, her blindness seeming no hindrance as she navigated the underbrush.

They ventured deeper into the woods, where the sounds of nocturnal creatures grew louder—the hoot of an owl, the distant howl of a wild dog. Ekanem's heart pounded in his chest, a mix of fear and excitement propelling him forward.

Imomotimi entered a small clearing bathed in silvery moonlight, bright as a dull day. Ekanem halted behind a small rock, its rough surface pressing against his back. Peering around, he watched as she knelt before a crude altar made of stacked stones.

Atop the altar sat a small clay idol, its features worn but discernible—a figure with outstretched arms, as if reaching for something unattainable. Wrapped around the idol was a necklace woven from two types of hair: one coarse and black, the other fine and graying.

From within her garments, the old woman produced a slender knife that caught the moon's light, and a calabash bowl etched with intricate patterns. Ekanem's breath caught in his throat. He knew he was witnessing a ritual, perhaps forbidden, but he couldn't look away.

She held the knife over her open palm. With a swift, practiced motion, she sliced her skin. Blood welled up, dark and shimmering. She tilted her hand over the bowl, allowing the blood to drip steadily into it. Ekanem felt a cold chill run down his spine.

She set the knife aside and began adding herbs to the bowl—leaves and powders he had seen the Chief priest at his village use before. For a second, his mind wandered back to the village, he wondered if there had been any other survivors, the Chief Priest, Abeni, then he thought about his mother.

The leaves were used for protection, for communion with the spirit world. She ground the mixture with a small pestle, her lips moving in a chant. The words were foreign, but one name surfaced repeatedly: "Urona."

She lifted the gourd and poured the concoction over the clay idol. The liquid traced paths down its form, pooling at the base. She then strained the remaining mixture through a sieve woven from grass into a calabash. Raising it to her lips, she drank deeply.

Almost immediately, her body convulsed. She doubled over, a low moan escaping her lips. Her fingers clawed at the earth as she grappled with the pain. Through gritted teeth, she whispered, "One more day, sister. Just one more day to keep you safe, to keep you close to me."

Ekanem's chest tightened. He wanted to rush out, to help her, but his feet felt rooted to the spot. As he wrestled with his indecision, a movement caught his eye.

At the edge of the clearing stood the chicken. It watched Imomotimi intently, its stillness was unsettling. The old woman then began to gag and retch, she then heaved up a massive lump into another calabash. She dropped it, and the chicken began to feed voraciously.

Ekanem could no longer bear it. Pushing aside his fear, he entered the clearing, trying not to alert the chicken, as he crawled in.

She spun toward him, her milky eyes wide. Despite her blindness, it felt as though she looked directly into his soul. "Child, what have you done?" she whispered, a tremor in her voice betraying her fear.

He swallowed hard. "I... I couldn't sleep. I saw you leave and I was worried."

"You shouldn't have followed me!" she snapped. "It's dangerous!"

He took a hesitant step forward. "You're hurting yourself. I want to help."

She shook her head vehemently. "You don't understand. This is not for you to see."

"But I do understand," he insisted. "You're trying to hold on to someone you've lost. I know that feeling."

She stared at him, her expression softening slightly. "Am I wrong?"

"What do you know of loss?" she retorted.

"This is how you keep Urona safe... at the risk of your own life." Ekanem said as a tear rolled down his cheek.

"My mother," he said quietly. "She's gone. And every day I wish I could bring her back."

Imomotimi's shoulders sagged. "When I entered Ajo-ala, there was only one thing I wished for... to see my mother again. I met someone in there, he looked like a baby, but I know he's older than I am."

"I wanted to ask him for help, but I didn't. I had a feeling I would see him again... when I left Ajo-Ala, I wished to find a way to bring my mother back any way I could."

"But after what I've seen with Urona, I don't know if I want to anymore. I would hate for my mother to be that scary. I think she might be in trouble in the afterlife, but I would rather help her find rest than keep her here like this.

I wouldn't want to remember her like this. I want to remember her as soft, she took care of me and always told me stories." he said, staring at the amulet as he wore it around his neck. Eventhough it wasn't his mother's, it was now a reminder of her more than anything else.

The woman's posture softened. "You are but a child. These matters are beyond you."

"I'm not just a child," he insisted, stepping closer. "I've learned things. My mother taught me about the spirits, about rituals. I learn things from seeing them, in ways people don't understand. I just wish I could have used that to protect my mother."

She turned her face toward him, a mixture of sadness and resignation.

"Then you know I'm trying to keep my sister here, to protect her."

Ekanem nodded slowly. "But at what cost? You're hurting yourself. And it looks like... maybe you're hurting her too."

"I will not be lectured by a child!" she yelled, the chicken was startled, but it continued to feed. She caught herself and apologized, "I'm sorry, my child"

"She's my sister. My only family. I lost her once already," she whispered. "I can't afford to lose her again... to lose her completely."

He hesitated, trying to choose his words carefully. "I might not know much, but I know that I wouldn't want my mother to suffer, and she won't want me to suffer either," he replied gently. "Maybe it's time to let her find peace."

The old woman shook her head violently as she began to cry again, "No, no, no..." then, she stopped and took a deep breath.

"Whenever I asked about my other family members, my mother used to say that holding on too tight can cause more pain than letting go. That sometimes, we have to set those we love free." Ekanem continued.

"She didn't mean in death, but I know that applies just as greatly." he finished.

The old woman nodded, and there was a moment of silence, then, she said, "Your mother truly must have been... special", helping herself unto a wooden stool.

Then, silence again for a long moment, the night sounds filling the space between them. The chicken was close to finishing the meal. Finally, Ekanem said, "I'm afraid."

The old woman responded, "Me too," as she pulled Ekanem into her embrace. "But maybe we can be brave together."

She looked at him, her eyes searching his face. "You are wise beyond your years, Ekanem. And I was wrong about what I said to you earlier in the day. You're not stupid, just brave."

A faint smile tugged at her lips. "Perhaps it's time," she said softly. "Time to let my sister find peace."

Relief washed over him. "We can help her together," he said.

She nodded, taking a deep breath. "There is a ritual we have to perform. We should prepare," she said, "Walk me back to my hut," she said, slowly rising from the bench.

## ***The Detanglement***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

At the hut, the old woman officially asked, for the first time, she called him by his name, "Ekanem, would you like to become my apprentice, and help me help my sister find peace?"

Ekanem felt honored, he replied, "Yes, teach me."

"In the beginning, I told you names had power, and you do not hand out names unless necessary. I am ready to tell you mine, Ekanem. My name is Imomotimi the daughter of Kurokeme" she said, "In the event that I die doing this, it will be your duty to put me to rest."

This scared Ekanem, and now he was reconsidering his involvement in the situation. He might be sending the only other woman to have cared for him to her grave if this fails.

The old woman sensed this turned to Ekanem, "No need to fret, I not plan on dying today." then she laughed.

They spent the next hour gathering what was needed. First, she broke a gourd on the floor, it smelt awful and putrid. She picked up the rope and wiped off the fluid from the rope using a piece of clothe, then, she left the hut.

From the riverbank, they collected white clay, its smooth texture cool beneath their fingers. They harvested red palm oil from the groves at the forest's edge, its color vibrant even in the dim light. Imomotimi explained

each item's significance—the clay for purity and passage, the oil for life and connection, the kola nuts for acceptance and offering.

As dawn approached, they returned to the clearing. The sky began to blush with the first hints of sunrise. Imomotimi knelt and began drawing a complex symbol on the ground with the white clay, her fingers moving with practiced precision. Ekanem assisted, pouring small amounts of palm oil along the lines she created.

They placed the clay idol at the center of the symbol. Imomotimi handed Ekanem the necklace of intertwined hair. "This binds her here, her lifeline is connected to mine, and a little bit of my lifeforce I shed to keep the chicken, and her by extension, alive." she said. "We must detangle and unweave it."

First, she removed the large black feather at the base of the necklace. Immediately they did, the chicken let out a visceral croak. Ekanem could hear the chicken running towards them from the bushes behind the old woman.

"Watch out!" Ekanem yelled, but as soon as the chicken appeared, the woman effortlessly stretched out her arm and caught the chicken by its neck. The chicken began to struggle, clawing and chomping. She began to tie the chicken, as soon as the rope touched the chicken, it went still—as though it had been paralyzed. She then tied the chicken's legs and tied the other end of the rope to a tree.

She returned to Ekanem and together, they carefully separated the strands. After separating the hair, she began to chant an incantation. After she was

done, she took the coarse black hair—Urona's—and pressed it into the earth. "Return to the soil," she whispered. The fine graying hair—her own—she released into the wind. "Carry me forward," she breathed.

She crushed the kola nuts in her hands, the fragments falling over the idol like scattered petals. "Now, sing the chant lines I taught you," she instructed.

Ekanem knelt before the chicken, closed his eyes and began the incantation. The words felt familiar on his tongue. His voice was soft at first but grew stronger with pass. The old lady prayed to the idol in the meantime.

As the sun's rays pierced through the trees, the air around them seemed to shimmer. The woman chicken began to convulse, its form began to waver, becoming translucent. As soon as this started, the old lady joined Ekanem, and they transitioned to the second part of the incantation, as they reached the climax, the chicken transformed into a burst of light, leaving behind two glistening stones.

The light from the stones enveloped the idol, growing brighter until it was almost too much to look at. Within it, a figure appeared—a woman with gentle eyes and a serene smile. Urona's spirit looked upon her sister with love and gratitude. Imomotimi reached out, tears streaming down her face. "Goodbye, sister," she whispered.

Urona nodded, her lips forming silent words of reassurance. The light began to ascend, fading slowly into the morning sky.

A profound silence settled over the clearing, broken only by the soft rustling of leaves. The oppressive weight that had hung in the air was gone. Birds began to sing, their melodies filling the space with life.

Imomotimi gasped softly. She brought her hands to her face, her eyes wide with wonder. "Ekanem," she said, her voice trembling. "I can see."

He turned to her, eyes wide. "You can?"

She nodded, tears of joy spilling over. "Yes. I can see the trees, the sky... and you."

Ekanem grinned, his heart swelling. "That's amazing!"

She reached out to touch his face, her fingers tracing his features. "Thank you," she said earnestly. "You have given me a gift beyond measure."

He shook his head modestly. "We did it together."

She looked around, taking in the vibrant colors of the forest bathed in sunlight. "The world is more beautiful than I remember," she murmured.

Ekanem shared her sentiment, he had not experienced the beauty of the nature around him since his mother had died. He stood beside her, feeling a lightness in his heart. "It really is."

They stood there for a few moments longer, soaking in the newfound peace. Finally, Imomotimi turned to him. "Shall we go home?"

Ekanem nodded eagerly. "Yes. I think today will be a good day."

Ekanem pointed at the skies, "Look, birds." The terror of the chicken had kept birds from coming to that side of the forest, now that it was gone, they had returned.

As they neared the hut, he glanced up at Imomotimi. "Will you tell me more about your sister sometime?"

She smiled softly. "I'd like that. And perhaps you can tell me more about your mother."

He nodded enthusiastically. "I'd like that a lot."

### **Vignette - The part that hurts the most**

*I would love to tell you that Imomotimi then became the adopted mother of Ekanem, and they lived happily ever after, but that... that would be a lie... that is the part of the story that wounds me the most.*

*The next morning when Ekanem arose, he wasn't greeted by the smell of cooked food. Rather, he was greeted by a black flower growing by Imomotimi's mat, and Imomotimi's lifeless body. It took him two whole days to dig the grave. He laid her to rest by himself.*

## **Chapter 4: Grief - A warrior's farewell**

### **Lore Notes - Scavengers**

*It is said that vultures follow the raiders because they know that they leave carcasses in their wake.*

## **Grief - Night Terrors**

In the aftermath of the devastating events in the town of Oritameje, Abebi awoke in the hut where she had given birth to her babies. Darkness enveloped everything, both inside the hut and beyond. The air was thick with an unsettling quiet, broken only by distant murmurs.

She could hear commotion outside—a different kind of chaos from what she had experienced earlier in the day. Voices clamored, indistinct yet urgent. Abebi strained to listen, hoping to discern the cause of the unrest, but the more she focused, the more the noises melded into a meaningless cacophony.

Worried for her babies, she rose unsteadily and began searching the dim hut. She felt along the walls, the floor, every corner where they might be nestled. But they were nowhere to be found. Her chest tightened as she panicked and tried to scream, but her voice caught in her throat, and her screams were silent.

She burst out of the hut, finding herself amidst a crowd. They all just stood there, eerily. All facing the same direction, some with arms raised, pointing at something she could not see. The moon was at a crescent here, it cast a pale glow.

Desperate, Abebi grabbed the nearest person by the hand. "Please, help me!" she implored. The figure turned to face her, but had no face — no eyes, nose, or mouth. She recoiled in horror and let go of the person's hand.

As she looked around at the rest of the crowd. They all began to turn around in unison, and they were all faceless as well.

Then, one after the other, they began to point to an elevated platform, and on the platform, her babies were laying, in front of a hooded figure.

Heart pounding, she started to run toward them, but with each step, the distance seemed to stretch impossibly. The platform receded even as she raced forward. Her legs felt heavy, the ground beneath her shifting like sand. Yet she pushed on, fueled by fear and desperation.

At last, she reached the platform. The hooded figure stood with their back to her, cloaked in garments she recognized—the distinctive attire of Fatoye, a mage-priest who had vanished from the village when she was a girl. Around the figure's ankle was an anklet adorned with cowrie shells, their soft rattling a memory from her childhood. The sound had always heralded Fatoye's approach before he was seen.

In the hooded figure's left hand was a knife, and on their right, a wooden rattle toy—the kind used to soothe infants. Abebi's eyes shifted to the babies lying at the entity's feet. They appeared unharmed, but they were eerily still. Upon taking a closer look, she realized that the babies were not hers, they were girls.

Confused and terrified, she reached out and spun the hooded figure around, but when she did, it was not Fatoye at all. It was the face of her twin sister.

"Abeni?!" she gasped, flabbergasted. She attempted to lift her up from the kneeling position, but observed that her sister was chained to the panel.

Abeni opened her mouth to speak, but the voice that emerged was that of Ajanaku, Abebi's husband. "Help me!" he—or she—pleaded, then pushed Abebi off the panel back into the crowd.

Abebi jolted awake, drenched in cold sweat, drenched in cold sweat. Her heart hammered against her ribcage as she struggled to catch her breath. She glanced to her left and saw Iyalode sitting calmly beside her.

"*Şe kò sì, ọmọ mi?*" ("Is all well with you, my child?") Iyalode asked gently, placing a cool hand on Abebi's forehead as if checking for a fever.

Abebi sat up, her eyes darting around the room. She realized she was not in the hut from her dream but back in her own home. The room was dimly lit, shadows stretching across the walls. Outside, the first light of dawn crept over the horizon. Her babies lay peacefully asleep nearby, their tiny chests rising and falling with each breath.

The morning birds had begun their songs, but today their melodies carried a somber tone. Amidst the usual chirping was the harsh croak of a vulture, sending a shiver down Abebi's spine.

"I heard you scream," Iyalode continued. "When I came in, you were calling your sister's name over and over. But you and I know no one has uttered that name around here in many moons." She looked at Abebi with concern etched on her face. "What did you see?"

"It was just night terrors, Iyalode. I'm fine," Abebi replied, attempting a reassuring smile. "May I see the babies?"

Iyalode hesitated for a moment, as if expecting more of an explanation. Then she stood and moved toward the infants. She picked up one of the babies, cradling him gently, then set him back down.

"Before that, here, have a kolanut," she said, beginning to undo a knot in her *iró*. From within the folds of the cloth, she produced four kolanuts. Taking one, she placed it in a small calabash and scooped water from the clay pot by the bed to rinse it. Breaking it in two, she offered half to Abebi.

Abebi shook her head, declining the bitter seed. Iyalode was known for offering kolanuts in any and every situation, swearing by their healing properties. She believed kolanuts could cure any ailment, from a simple headache to a broken bone. Many in the village thought her eccentric, perhaps even a bit senile.

"Have I told you how kolanuts saved my life?" Iyalode began, undeterred. "You know there are small animals that live within all of us. Some can harm our well-being, and to keep the bad ones out, we must practice *imötótó* (cleanliness) and eat kolanuts! They chase away the bad animals and even kill some of them."

Abebi managed a faint smile. She had heard this story countless times, as had most villagers.

She would even spend her time trying to convince the herbalists and

healers about these animals, but they all knew there were no such tiny animals, illnesses were caused by malevolent spirits that they could ward away with sacrifices and rituals... not kolanuts. But they also knew her intentions were pure.

"I'll eat it if you won't," Iyalode shrugged, popping half into her mouth and wrapping the other half back into her *iró*. She returned to Abebi's side, handing her one of the babies and holding the other herself. Sitting close, she gazed lovingly at the infants.

"They've been sleeping this whole time," Iyalode remarked, smiling down at Abidogun as he slept peacefully.

"He... they look exactly like him." Abebi whispered, her voice tinged with sorrow as she studied their tiny faces.

"Ajanaku mi" (My Ajanaku) she sobbed and looked at Iyalode.

"Where is my husband's body?!" she suddenly jerked, "...the vultures! They cannot have my husband." she said springing up, but as soon as she got up, she got dizzy, and sank right back down.

"Ahhh! Róraa! Abebí!!" ("Ahhh! Be careful! Abebi!") Iyalode exclaimed, reaching out to steady her.

"We would never leave your husband to the vultures." she said, perplexed, her eyes reflecting concern. "The vultures are probably after the bodies of the Omi soldiers in the jungle."

"His comrades—the soldiers and hunters—came to retrieve his body after the battle, as is their duty," Iyalode said, sitting back down beside Abebi. "They are preparing him for burial as we speak." She paused, her eyes glistening. "I am so sorry for your loss." She broke down, tears streaming as she embraced Abebi. "Ọkùnrin akínkójú, aràmàndá ènìyàn sì ni Ajanaku," ("Ajanaku was a brave hero, and a man of wonders,") she sniffled.

"I have to raise these children by myself. Without Ajanaku..." Abebi's voice trembled as she looked down at her babies. "The future of his bloodline now rests upon my shoulders, with no support," she whispered.

"You know that's not true," Iyalode reassured her, gently rubbing her shoulder. "We will raise these children together. You have my support and that of the entire village he died protecting."

Abebi wiped away her tears, but they kept flowing. "I want to see him," she said, leaning back against the wall. "Can you take me to where the soldiers took his body?"

"Èwò` ni yíí, Abebi," ("That is a taboo, Abebi,") Iyalode replied firmly. "His body has not been cleansed of the taints of a violent death."

"But I was there when he died. I already saw," Abebi interjected.

Iyalode took a deep breath. "What you witnessed was his passing, not his corpse. According to tradition, his body must be washed with herbs and accompanied by prayers. The hunters have to complete the correct rites before you can see him in that state. You cannot see him before that."

She looked intently at Abebi. "I promise to take you there as soon as he is

ready. Now, take a kolanut and rest while I help prepare for the funeral."

Abebi acquiesced, nodding slowly.

Iyalode stood up and left the room, but not before stationing two soldiers by the door to protect Abebi and her sons. She also left her own daughter, Morenike, to attend to Abebi's needs—to help her clean up and, most importantly, to ensure she did not leave the house unaccompanied.

After about an hour, Iyalode returned with fresh clothes for Abebi. She brought with her a dark blue Aso Oke fabric ensemble, consisting of a buba (blouse) and iro (wrap). Iyalode, alongside the guards, walked to the location of Ajanaku's body.

On their way, a few villagers stopped to greet and honor both Iyalode and Abebi. As they were parting, one of the villagers turned back and said to Iyalode, "Ẹ kú ìpójnjú, iyá wa. Olódùmarè á tẹ Adígún yín sí àfẹfẹ́ ìre." ("My condolences, our mother. May God grant your Adigun sweet rest.")

Upon hearing this, Abebi froze and began to tremble. She hadn't realized that Iyalode had lost her eldest son, Adigun, in the battle.

"Adigun t'iyín... ti..." ("Your Adigun... has...") The question hung unfinished. Iyalode's eyes reddened, filling with tears. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she gave a subtle nod. Abebi embraced her, holding her tightly. When they pulled apart, Iyalode managed a faint smile, but the pain lingered in her eyes. The rest of the walk was cloaked in silence.

When they reached the hut, Iyalode bid Abebi farewell. "Ọmọ mi, you know you are not the only one I have to look after today," she said gently. "I will

be taking my leave to help some of the other families, while I give you space to spend time with your beloved." She broke another kolanut and bit into it as she walked away.

Abebi entered the hut to find her giant of a husband lying lifeless. He occupied more space than the mat could offer. He was called Ajanaku—the Elephant, the Great One—for a reason. She caressed his forehead, recalling how she used to tease him about his wrinkled brow when they first met, joking that it was the result of decades spent never relaxing his face muscles, always vigilant like a hawk.

Her fingers traced the map of scars across his body. She had been there through most of those injuries, some sustained in combat, others from training. Her gaze settled on his left calf—a particular scar from a dare when he climbed a coconut tree to its peak. He had succeeded, but his weight snapped the tree in half, sending him tumbling into a heap of fronds and leaves below, where a stick had pierced his leg.

"I thought I would be there to witness and tend to more of your minor injuries," she whispered, tears streaming down her face. She gently stroked his beard. Suddenly, the booming of a *gángan* drum echoed outside. More drums joined in, creating a pulsating rhythm. She stood and moved to the doorway to see what was happening.

Outside, she saw a group of drummers and two singers—a man and a woman. The woman began to sing, her voice carrying the weight of tradition. They were the village musicians preparing for the *Irémójé*, the ritual rite performed for hunters and warriors.

She could hear Iyalode's voice rising above the drums. "What is there to drum and sing about? The tragedy of this senseless war?" she exclaimed. She insisted they keep their distance and allow the widow time to mourn her husband.

A chief named Oyebade stood nearby. He approached Iyalode apologetically. "Please forgive them, Iyalode. They are acting under my instructions. Given the number of soldiers who died, we cannot allow Abebi too long with her husband before we must commence the funeral rites."

Iyalode fixed him with a stern gaze, saying nothing. Under the intensity of her stare, Oyebade shifted uncomfortably. "But of course, we can wait a little longer," he conceded.

Without another word, Iyalode turned and walked away.

Abebi returned to her husband, cherishing these final moments. When she eventually stepped out of the hut, she felt a gentle tug at her side. Startled, she looked down to see Bósè, a twelve-year-old girl she was fond of. The girl often visited Abebi's hut to play.

"I'm so happy to see you!" Bósè exclaimed. "I heard you had twins!" She released Abebi and then added softly, "I'm sorry about your husband's passing." She clasped her hands together and bowed her head slightly. Abebi offered a faint smile, touched by the girl's sincerity.

"The chief said they want to begin Ȍremoјé," Bósè said as they walked together. "What is that?"

"Ìremoјé is the rite of passage for hunters and warriors, as decreed by Ogun, the deity of war," Abebi explained. The atmosphere around them was heavy with anticipation.

Bósè, her eyes filled with a mix of solemnity and youthful curiosity, broke the silence. "I overheard my mother this morning. She was telling my father that because of your husband's sacrifice, the entire village will postpone all other funerals until after his." She slipped her small hand into Abebi's. "His bravery saved us all. His spirit will lead the way for all the others who fell," she said, looking up with wide, respectful eyes.

Abebi nodded, her heart swelling with bittersweet pride. "Ajanaku always put others before himself. It seems, even in death, he paves the way."

Bósè walked Abebi back to her hut before returning home. Upon entering, Abebi found a new set of clothes for the funeral laid out on the bed. Morenike was in the corner, watching over the babies. Abebi approached her, and they embraced, sharing unspoken condolences for the loved ones they had both lost.

### ***Grief - The Funeral***

The funeral rites for Ajanaku were unlike any the village had witnessed. It began with the two singers and drummers from earlier in the day. They sang Ajanaku's oriki as loudly as they could, drumming loudly to signal to the villagers that the funeral was about to commence. They sang Ajanku's battle oriki, as though he was about to head into battle:

*Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!  
Erin jinja, ọmọ Ogunremi,*

*Ọpẹ́ ìrókò tí ndúró ní àárín ogun,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!*

*Ó já bí ọrọ́, ó ṣe bí òjò,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!  
Ejé ọmọ-ogun tí ò lè dànù,  
Ọpẹ́ ìrókò tí kò lè wó.*

Translation:

*Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!  
Brave elephant, son of Ogunremi,  
The iroko tree that stands firm in the midst of battle,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!*

*He fights like the storm,  
he moves like the rain,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!  
The blood of a warrior that cannot be spilled,  
The iroko tree that cannot be felled.*

Before long, a large crowd had gathered, and a procession was formed. Families came together from their various compounds to witness. The procession was led by his fellow warriors and hunters, the chiefs and his family members including Abebi followed closely behind, then, the king's orchestra followed behind them, playing gongon (talking drums), kakaki (trumpet), shekere (percussion gourd), playing dirges and heroic melodies.

The rest of the community followed behind the band celebrating Ajanaku's life, young men and women alike. Boys in bante, girls in tobi, and some little children wandered around in their birthday suits.

Ajanaku's body laid on a platform, he was adorned in a beautiful red regalia, covered in his armor. On the floor to his side were his hunting bag of charms, his weapons—a bow, arrows and his jómó, and finally, the war staff, rife with various charms and amulets.

The procession ended in a grove just outside the village, under a large tree, where the villagers gathered in a circle. The staff of war was planted in the ground, its tip glistening in the sun.

One by one, soldiers, comrades in arms with Ajanaku, stepped forward. The air filled with a solemn energy as each shared tales of Ajanaku's life. Their voices, thick with emotion, painted a picture of a man of valor, a man whose few failures were far overshadowed by a multitude of successes.

The first soldier to speak was a seasoned soldier called Odetoba, he had lines of scars on his face, he began, "Ajanaku..." he said, staring at the ground for a moment as though he did not know where to begin. "For those of you that are too young to know, he was the son of the old Baale of the village, he was the only one child of the family, and his birthname was Oderinde. I think we are all familiar with how he became known as Ajanaku."

// *Anansi: Don't worry, I will tell you that story when the time comes*

Ajanaku was not just a warrior; he was a guardian, and a brother," his voice steady, but laden with grief. "His techniques in battle, his unparalleled skills, and his unyielding kindness marked the footsteps of a legend we were all proud to follow."

Another spoke of Ajanaku's presence on the battlefield, "In battle, his presence was like a fortress. We stood behind him, not just because he was our chief, but because his courage was infectious."

A hunter came up and spoke as well, talking about his lineage, tracing back to a line of legendary warriors whose deeds were etched in the very soul of the village. "He was a link in an unbroken chain, a continuum of bravery

and honor that has protected us through generations”

Another soldier stepped forward, a younger man who had looked up to Ajanaku as a mentor. "I remember when I first joined the warriors. Ajanaku took me under his wing. He said, 'Bravery isn't the absence of fear but the will to overcome it.' I carry those words with me every day."

Laughter and tears mixed as another comrade recounted a tale of Ajanaku's rare failure—a misjudged leap during a hunt that landed him in a thicket of thorns. "Even then, he laughed first, pulling thorns from his hide and joking that he'd simply wanted to test the thorns' sharpness."

As the soldiers shared, a figure detached from the shadows at the edge of the gathering—Olugbade. His gaze was fixed on the proceedings, a complex mixture of envy and calculation in his eyes. His hidden joy at Ajanaku's death was a stark contrast to the collective sorrow.

Olugbade—the seriki, seen by many as next in line for the position of war chief, saw Ajanaku's passing as an opportunity. As the soldiers continued sharing, Olugbade slipped away with some of his men, and shared a toast of palm wine to his new post. But what he did not notice was that he was being watched.

Finally, the elders and Babalawos, led by Ifagbemi performed rites and rituals. The rituals began with the sacrifice of a goat, a dog and 3 chickens. Other rites were performed as well. After the rites and rituals had been performed Ajanaku's best friend, a hunter named Oderinde stepped

forward and recited the Iremoje, a poetic performance and tribute. The Iremoje went as follows:

*Ajanaku, mighty as the elephant,  
Fighting like a mighty storm and scheming in your battles like the clouds,  
Sagacious as an elder, wisdom flowing through your veins,  
as ancient as a sacred baobab*

*Ajanaku, the son of Balogun Ogunremi who ascended to the role of Baale,  
You were a warrior valiant and true, who rose to become Balogun too.  
Your legacy, though brief, shines upon us like the sun at its zenith.*

*A legacy that transcends your mortal form and lives on not in one, but in  
two,  
May their propagation of your legacy be equal to that of the Ibeji Orisha.  
Husband to Abebi, the crown adorned with love and strength,  
Your bond unbreakable even in the face of war's tempest.*

*Ajanaku, master of the battlefield, Champion of honor and justice,  
Standing tall and unyielding like the ancient city walls of Ile-Ife,  
Firm as a boulder overlooking a verdant of adversity.*

*In the heart of the hunt, you danced with the grace and elegance of Oshosi,  
Showing respect to friends and foes alike, for in your heart, compassion  
reigned supreme.*

*Ajanaku, bearer of the banner of life, leaving no soul behind,*

*Ajanaku, carrier of heavy war burdens, shouldering the weight of a thousand battles.*

*Ajanaku, in the throes of war, you met your fate, a warrior's final embrace.  
Your fall, a blow to all, striking terror in the hearts of your enemies.  
And for your bravery, your oriki, your sacred praise shall echo through the ages.*

*Ahh, Ajanaku, our eyes ache at your loss,  
And your absence leaving a gaping void in the hearts of those you touched.*

*Ahh Ajanaku, tears flow abundant as you lay still,  
But your legacy stands tall, unshakable, weathering the storm.*

*Ajanaku, the elephant, the storm, the sage, the guardian.  
Let your kakaki (trumpet) blow loud one last time for all to hear.*

The iremoje ended with the thundering of a massive Kakaki that lasted [.? how long?], then, the hunters and warriors detached from the rest of the group and took Ajanaku's body with them into the forest where they performed the final rites of the hunter and warrior. They returned the following morning and buried him in the family compound. Abebi was not allowed to participate.

## ***The Naming Ceremony***

The soft glow of dawn filtered through the woven walls of Abebi's hut, casting long shadows across the earthen floor. Outside, the village stirred to life, a subdued hum of activity that belied the recent tragedy that had befallen them.

Today was the day her sons would receive their names—a day she had long anticipated with Ajanaku by her side. Now, she faced it alone, her heart heavy with both joy and sorrow.

Abebi sat quietly, cradling her twin boys. Their tiny hands grasped at the air, oblivious to the weight of the moment. She hummed softly, a melody Ajanaku had loved, finding solace in the memory of his deep, rumbling laugh.

As the sun climbed higher, friends and family began to gather. The air filled with the rich aroma of freshly prepared food, the pounding of yams and the smell of okra soup. Women moved with purpose, arranging ceremonial items and tending to last-minute preparations. The men stood in small groups, their voices low, eyes constantly scanning the forest's edge—a habit born of recent battles.

Iyalode entered, her presence commanding respect. She moved directly to Abebi, enveloping her in a warm embrace. "You are strong, my dear," she whispered, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "Ajanaku would be so proud." She then glanced at the twins and chuckled softly, "Though I must

say, these little ones seem to have inherited your stubbornness rather than Ajanaku's patience. They couldn't even wait to be born one at a time!"

The hut soon filled with a mix of familiar faces. Warriors stood tall, their bodies bearing fresh scars from recent conflicts. Hunters moved with practiced stealth, even in this peaceful setting. And there, near the entrance, stood the king's son—his presence a symbol of royal acknowledgment that did not go unnoticed.

A hush fell over the gathering as the Oluawo, Ifagbemi entered. He walked to the front of the gathering and began to speak.

"We gather here," Ifagbemi began, his voice steady and strong, "to welcome these young ones into our community. In times of peace, and in times of war, new life is our greatest blessing." He raised his hands, giving thanks to Olodumare and the Orishas. He then gestured for the items to be presented.

One by one, the ceremonial items were presented. Water, Palm oil, Honey and sugar, promising sweetness in life. Salt, for wisdom and preservation. Kola nut, bitter kola, and atare (alligator pepper), each carrying its own significance.

Ifagbemi took the first child from Abebi's arms. "This child," Ifagbemi proclaimed, his voice carrying to every corner of the hut, "shall be called Abidogun, for he was born in thick of the battle." He touched each item to the child's lips, murmuring blessings with each one.

"And to honor his father," Ifagbemi continued, "he shall also bear the name Babatunde. For in him, we see the return of a great warrior."

A murmur of approval rippled through the crowd. Abebi felt a surge of emotion—pride mingled with a fresh wave of grief.

The second child was presented, his cries piercing the solemn atmosphere. Ifagbemi smiled, a rare break in his serious demeanor. "This one has the voice of a warrior already," he said, eliciting a few chuckles from the gathering. "He shall be called Abogunde, for he came with the war." Again, the items were presented, each touch accompanied by a prayer for strength, wisdom, and protection.

"And he too shall honor his father," Ifagbemi declared. "He shall be Babatunji, for in him, we see the awakening of Ajanaku's spirit."

As the naming concluded, elders stepped forward to offer individual blessings. Warriors shared brief tales of Ajanaku's bravery, their words painting a vivid picture of a man larger than life. The king's son spoke, his words carefully chosen, pledging royal support for the twins and their mother.

Iyalode stood, her presence drawing all eyes. "These children," she began, her voice strong despite the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her, "are born of love and sacrifice. They carry within them the strength of their father and the resilience of their mother." She turned to Abebi, her gaze

filled with admiration. "And you, my dear, embody the spirit of our people. In your grace, we find hope for the future."

Abebi rose slowly, her body still recovering from the difficult birth. She held her sons close, their warmth a comfort against the cool morning air. "I thank you all," she said, her voice soft but steady. "For your support, your love, and your presence here today." She looked down at her children, a small smile playing at her lips. "Ajanaku lives on in these boys, and in the hearts of all who knew him. I vow to raise them to honor his memory and to serve our people with the same courage and wisdom their father showed."

A moment of shared emotion passed through the gathering. Then, slowly, the somber mood began to lift. Soft drums began to play, a gentle rhythm, traditional songs were sung, voices blending in harmony that seemed to chase away the lingering shadows of grief.

As the ceremony drew to a close, a calabash of blessed water was passed around. Each person touched it, a symbol of communal support and shared responsibility for the twins' future. Light refreshments were shared, and conversations began to blend remembrance with cautious optimism for what lay ahead.

The king's son approached Abebi as guests began to depart. "Your husband was a great man," he said, his voice low. "These boys will have much to live up to." His eyes, sharp and assessing, moved from the twins to Abebi's face. "The palace will be watching their progress with great interest. And you with them," the Prince was hinting at something, the first part she

understood, but the last part ‘...and you with them...’ she did not understand. Rather than seek clarity, she bowed to the prince and thanked him for gracing the ceremony with his presence.

As the last of the guests filtered out, Abebi found herself once again seated on her mat, Iyalode and Morenike at her side. The twins, exhausted by the day's events, slept peacefully in her arms.

"You did well," Iyalode said softly, her hand resting on Abebi's shoulder.

Abebi nodded, her eyes never leaving her sons' faces. In them, she saw echoes of Ajanaku—the strong brow, the set of the jaw. And for the first time, she felt hope. "We will endure," she whispered, as much to herself as to her sleeping children. "We will thrive."

She only wished that at least her sister would be by her side. She missed Abeni.

## Chapter 5: The Lost

### ***Beleku - Misery has no friends***

Beleku ran as fast as his legs could carry him. He was always fast on his feet.

“It’s not everyday that a man slated to die gets the chance to escape” he said, his voice struggling to rise above his heavy breathing. He was determined to get as far as he possibly could from the village as he could. “What if they send guards? What if I’m captured by the enemy?”

After a few moments of running, a faint, mournful cry echoed in the distance, sending a shiver down Beleku’s spine. ‘What was that?’ he muttered to himself, he began to contemplate on where the crying must have come from when he suddenly felt a dull pain under his right foot.

He sucked in air, he had stepped on something sharp. But he had no time to stop. As he continued to run, the pain began to slowly get worse. He looked down at his feet, and his eyes caught a glimpse of blood gushing out of his foot.

He looked behind him to see if he was being followed, but there was nothing but a trail of blood. “Oh. That’s a problem”, he said. “I can be tracked with this trail.” He stopped, looked around some more, and when he was satisfied that no one was following him, he sat on a rock. He reached into the left seam of his àdîre and ripped a piece out of it. He tied

the fabric around his feet to constrict his blood vessels and slow the blood flow.

Even though he was fairly familiar with the forests around the village, he had no idea where he was. He typically entered the forest through the same familiar routes, but, given the circumstances, he had just ran into the closest bush and kept running in random directions to throw off anybody that might attempt to track him.

Despite this, he was paranoid. He had to make sure the trail of blood ended here.

“Should any one try to follow me, they need to get lost” he said. He needed to find Imí Èṣù (Billygoat weed), but there wasn’t any in sight. So, he tore more from his àdìre (tie-dye fabric, and used it to cover the cut itself. He got up and slowly placed his leg down, then, slowly rested his weight on it to see if it was comfortable enough to walk on. He could walk, but he could no longer run, so he wandered through the forest, until he could barely walk.

He searched the forest floor around him for a branch to use as a temporary walking stick. It was starting to get harder to see the forest floor, for it had begun to get dark. He not only needed a stick, but he also needed to find a safe place to lay his head when it got dark. Making a fire wasn’t an option. He could be spotted by a hunter from the village, the invading soldiers, or even torn up by a wild animal in the middle of the night. A cave would work, but it would be next to impossible to find one before nightfall.

Recalling his childhood days when he would come out to the forest to hide. He managed to find a suitable walking stick, and soon began to find a tree with dense foliage. This would provide cover from the elements and any wandering humans or wildlife.

The terrain was rough, his leg throbbed with each step, but the forest floor was cushioned by the underbrush. There was still no Billygoat weed in sight, but that was beginning to become the least of his worries. The bleeding had stopped, but he still hadn't found shelter yet. He began collecting big leaves as he walked through the forest, and tied them on his back. Not only would they serve as cover for him, but they would also serve as cushion for him to lay on.

Unable to find a suitable place to sleep, he decided to climb the biggest tree he could find. After looking around, he found an Iroko tree. He stood for a moment and thought to himself "I would be mad to try climbing that.", so, he decided to climb the second biggest tree he could find. Luckily for him, the tree had vines around it that made climbing a bit easier. With his remaining strength, he climbed as high as he could. The pain in his foot ebbed slightly. And for the first time that day, he felt a little bit of peace.

The crickets chirped, and the leaves rustled as a calm breeze blew across the forest. He felt slightly dizzy, and his stomach rumbled from hunger. "I hope I don't fall before morning. That would be a tragic way to go, after escaping death." he whispered as he touched the adire covering his foot. It was soaked with thickened blood.

He would have been executed in the morning, had he not escaped. He mused to himself about his fate and the events leading up to his escape.

“I’m innocent” he said resolutely in the darkness as he shook his head. His mind kept replaying the events leading up to his imprisonment. The misery of his situation overtook him as the exhaustion slowly dragged him into a dreamy state, and finally, he drifted off to sleep.

“He has been accused by the Oluade family of the murder of their son, Olujide during their scouting mission” Beleku, in shackles, could hear the town crier announce to the court as he opened his eyes, he was being dragged into the court by two guards.

“You are the one they call Beleku?” Baálè questioned him.

“That is not my name!” he said angrily, “My name is...”

“Shut up! How dare you speak to the Baale like that, you critter. If you make another sound, I will have your tongue” the Baale shut him down.

“If I may, my lord”, a voice said, as a figure rose from the back of the room.

“This is the brother of the victim,” Baale announced. Beleku's heart sank as he saw Oludaare walk up.

He bowed before the Kabiyesi, who had not yet spoken a word. “You may rise.” Kabiyesi said, as he beckoned to the young man to rise. The king’s voice was exceedingly deep, and Beleku observed that the rumors were true. No one could see the king’s face through his crown. The crown was adorned with beads that completely covered his face.

“He is known as Beleku because of an occurrence we are all familiar with. He has a fascination with death, even since we were all children. From the mysterious death of his parents to his escapades at the peat bog, lurking

around graveyards. An unnatural set of places for any normal person to hang around.”

“Those might sound like rumors, but my accusations are not based merely on speculations alone.” He said, raising an object covered in a bloody piece of fabric up in the air.

“Here is my brother’s finger, alongside his hair.” He said, presenting the bloody piece of cloth before the chiefs. He unwrapped it to reveal a thumb and another to reveal some hair.

“Ahh. How could this be?” One of the chiefs exclaimed, as grunts and yelps rolled through the gathering. All eyes settled on Beleku, who continued staring at the floor hoping it would swallow him whole.

“Isn’t he the one that was accused of killing and dismembering livestock last Harmattan?” Iyalode questioned.

“He was, my lady,” Oludaare said, bowing to her. “Every time there’s been a mass death of animals for as far as anyone can remember, he has been involved one way or the other” Oludaare added, then, he turned to Beleku and pointed at him, “And he murdered my brother during their mission.”

“While you make a compelling case against this man’s character, this is a grave accusation, young man.” One of the chiefs interjected sternly. “Awon Olùṣò mi, my guards reported that there was an accusation... that your brother ran away on the mission.” the chief said, then turned to Ajanaku, “Does that match the report your scout made to you?” Ajanaku nodded.

“My brother had misgivings before the mission, my lord. He came to me in the middle of the night before they embarked on the journey that claimed his life...” Oludaare paused for a moment as his voice broke.

“I urged him to go!” his voice broke further. “And this he-goat came back bearing my brother’s finger, accusing him of being a traitorous coward who ran away!” he stopped and knelt on one knee. “Olujide had a reputation in the town. He was known for many things, but being a coward was not one of them.”

“And has there been any more news about the missing young man?” Kabiyesi questioned.

“None, your highness, other than the report given by Beleku himself.” Ajanaku responded. “He reported to my sergeant that Olujide had run off during their scouting mission and was later discovered dead. But there was no report of a finger. This is news to me.”

“My brother was no coward, he would not run off like that.” Oludaare insisted.

“Explain yourself to the court.” Baale beckoned to Beleku, but he spoke no words. How would he even describe the horrors he witnessed in the forest?

Beleku stood before the court, the silence resonated through the room as everyone awaited his defense. “It wouldn’t matter what I said. I’m already dead” he thought to himself.

“Your silence only serves to condemn you further” Abebi chimed in. “This is a serious accusation, and you have been granted the opportunity to refute

it before this assembly.” she continued, but the boy stood stoically silent before the court. She looked at him, and his eyes betrayed a hint of resignation.

The court murmured amongst themselves. Even if the boy hadn’t done it, him returning back into the village would mean further social ostracism, and potentially, retributive action. Besides, someone had to pay for the murder of Olujide, an execution, either by the King’s court, or the court of public opinion.

“If you refuse to speak, then, you have sealed your fate.” declared Baale.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t be so hasty” Iyalode chimed in. “Given his history, the consequence of such a conviction is death, not a mere remedial action. An execution hasn’t taken place in many moons.”

“I agree, we must ensure justice is served, but also that it is tempered with wisdom and humanity.” one of the other chiefs added “But he has decided to remain silent. Perhaps, he is actually guilty.”

“We should involve Ifa in this matter.” Ajanaku rose “As the commander that sent them on this mission, I am very keen on getting justice for Olujide, but I am not comfortable simply sending this young man under the sharp edge of the executioner’s blade without certainty of his guilty, lest I send another innocent man to his death.”

“Ifagbemi is away with most of the other priests on pilgrimage to Ile-Ife” Baale responded. “We can only rely on one of his apprentices, Ifakolapo, who has been under his tutelage for the past three seasons.” Baale said, turning around and pointing to the back of the court at Ifakolapo.

“Ah! Èmi kè?” (“Ah! Why me?!”) the young apprentice said a little too loudly.

The room turned to look at the young apprentice, Kolapo, who had been quietly observing the proceedings from the back. His heart raced; he had never expected to be called upon in such a grave matter, especially in the absence of his colleagues, and most importantly, his father.

“Come forward” Kabiyesi said, signaling with his Òpa Àṣẹ (his staff). Ifakolapo walked forward with a mixture of fear and an eagerness to prove himself.

“Your highness!” he said, bowing before the king.

“You know, I am but an apprentice, and my skills in divination are still developing,” Kola began, his voice trembling slightly, then, he turned back to a room of slightly disappointed faces.

“However, I will do my utmost to seek guidance from Ifá on this matter.” he continued.

“Haven’t you completed Itefa? I was informed that you should be competent to perform divinations.” Baale questioned.

“I have, my lord” he said in a firm voice, he was about to explain that he was yet to complete his Itelodu, when he overheard.

“Şé ẹleyí mọ ise bayii?” (Is this one competent?) Odoofin whispered to one of the other chiefs, loud enough for Kolapo to hear and this angered the young man slightly. The chief replied “Òmọ Ìfágbeémí máa ní iyèn” (That is

actually Ifagbemi's son), to which Odoofin opened his mouth in surprise, "He has gotten really big."

"May I begin, your highness?" he asked, frowning his face as he bowed.

The Kabiyesi nodded, and Kolapo began the divination process. He cast his Ikín Ifá (sacred palm nuts), and began chanting:

*"Orunmila, witness of fate, guide my hands,*

*As I seek the truth hidden in the sands of time.*

*Eji Ogbe, the light that reveals the unseen,*

*Shed your clarity on what lies between."*

Beleku watched keenly, as the young priest chanted on, but, all of a sudden, the young priest began to make strange noises, he sounded like a bird. Confused, Beleku looked up, to see that the heads of all the members of the court had been replaced with the heads of various birds.

He turned back to look at the Kabiyesi, but there was only a gray parrot (Ayékòótó) in his seat, then, all the members of the court began to sing like birds. The parrot then whispered to him in the voice of the king, "Won't you wake up? You murderer?"

Beleku was jolted awake from his slumber by the fluttering of birds and a loud cry coming from a distance in the forest. The cry, accompanied by movement on the forest floor had disturbed the birds in the trees around him. They had begun to chirp and fly off in droves. Perhaps it was an animal hunting for prey in the darkness.

The forest floor was dark, and he could not see what the disturbance was, so, he tried to move, in order to get a better view, but his leg ached with pain, it had become too heavy to move. He was sweating profusely, and his temperature was high. His injury was becoming infected. As he reached for his foot, he was startled by a frightening loud scream from nearby. The sound was so terrifying that he peed himself a little.

‘How am I going to get down from here? Am I going to die in these trees after barely escaping with my life??’ he wondered to himself, too scared to make a sound. Beleku laid there, cradled by the rough embrace of the tree branch, the night’s silence punctuated by his ragged breaths and a distant, sorrowful wailing. It simultaneously sounded like a person, but it also sounded too otherworldly to be a person.

‘It must be one of the forest spirits,’ he thought to himself in the dark silence. “Perhaps, an Egberē?”. He was definitely not leaving the tree tonight. He slowly laid on the tree branch, and stretched out his leg to get comfortable, and stared into the darkness above him for the rest of the night, unable to sleep, unable to move his leg.

## ***Beleku - The fate of the lost***

As dawn broke, Beleku, still racked with pain and fever, knew he had to descend from the tree or risk dying of an infection. With a mix of desperation and determination, he began to cautiously slip down the tree. He then grabbed onto a vine and slipped down to the forest floor. The forest had begun to come alive again. He could not get over the crying he had heard the previous night; those sounds were haunting.

He began to wander through the forest in search of herbs that could help treat his wound and prevent a serious infection. He carefully marked trees along his path, in case he needed to find his way back, but he was careful not to leave an obvious trail behind.

As he continued, his attention was caught by a group of monkeys. Beleku watched the playful primates with a mix of curiosity and envy. 'Even in this dangerous forest, they find joy,' he thought. 'How long has it been since I felt such freedom?' The weight of his recent ordeal pressed heavily on his mind.

They began to move through the forest playfully, then they stopped, as though they were waiting for him to catch up. He hesitated, then thought to himself, 'Like I have anywhere else to go.'

So, he obliged. As soon as he got closer, they'd swing off into the distance. As he made his way through the forest, he collected a few herbs, but he still could not find his first choice, billygoat weed.

They swung playfully through the trees, their carefree movements a stark contrast to his own pained journey. For a brief moment, their antics brought a smile to his weary face, a fleeting reminder of simpler times.

This continued until Beleku found his nose assaulted by a rotting smell. Beleku recognized the smell but could not make out what it was. He followed cautiously and happened upon a mango tree. The smell was coming from rotting fruits all over the forest floor. The tree was very large and heavy with ripe fruit.

"This is a rare sight," were the first words he uttered that day. "There must be water near here." He looked up; the monkeys swung around restlessly. Beleku thought he saw a small, misshapen shadow dart between the trees ahead. When he looked again, it was gone.

He picked a few mangos off the lower branches and peeled off pieces from the bark of the tree, remembering their medicinal properties. With these, he would have enough to stave off an infection. As he peeled, one of the monkeys pelted him with a mango seed. Annoyed by it, he picked up a stone, and as he was about to throw it, he hesitated. Instead, he yelled at it, scaring off the troop in a flurry of screeches and leaves.

After the monkeys departed, he began to hear the soft trickle of a stream flowing nearby. When he looked in the direction of the water, he saw a giant ape that had been watching him the whole time. The ape was standing on one leg, and then it jumped, grabbed a branch, and swung away. He followed the path which then led him to the stream.

The water was clean, so he took off his buba (top) and sokoto (trousers). He sat on a rock and carefully unwrapped his injury. The piece of adire was sticky, filled with coagulated blood. It was an ugly sight.

He slowly placed his foot in the water. It was cold, and true relief overtook him. It was a short but profound moment; pain began to return to his foot after a few seconds. He washed off the piece of adire and rinsed off the pieces of tree bark. As he brought the last piece of the water, the water's surface rippled, disturbed by something Beleku couldn't see. A sense of being watched prickled at the back of his neck.

He found a small rock, rinsed off a portion of the large rock he was sitting on, and began to crush the bark into a pulp. After crushing it to a satisfactory level, he added the last few leaves he had gathered, and as he raised his arm to continue crushing, his eyes caught a glistening in the bushes.

When he looked up, he saw nothing, so he returned to crushing. A moment later, he noticed some movement downstream, from the same direction, behind some shrubs. He stopped and immediately limped behind a tree.

He peered through the leaves at what looked like an animal at first glance. But as he squinted, he could see a bit of a glow again.

Curious but cautious, he began to approach slowly. As he approached, something or someone ran off from behind the bushes. He did not get a clear look.

'That was definitely not an animal,' he thought to himself. He began to think, perhaps, it was a person, but it seemed too small to be an adult.

Perhaps it was a child. It wouldn't be such a far-fetched idea. During his own days as a child, he would come to the forest to play alone. He never fit in with any of the other children. But this was deep in the forest; perhaps the child was lost.

"I would go after whatever it is, but I am too weak and tired," he whispered under his breath.

He returned to the rock, he rinsed his foot again, applied the poultice of herbs, and wrapped it with the piece of adire. Then he sat on the rock, waiting for the child to return. After waiting for a while, he began to drift off to sleep, and within a moment, he was carried by the calming flow of the stream to slumber. By the time he awoke from his slumber, the first faint traces of twilight were seeping through the branches above him.

A light evening breeze rustled the trees, and the trickling stream provided a backdrop for the evening bird songs. He had been dreaming of the events leading up to his trial in the Kabiyesi's court again. Since he wasn't jarred awake this time, it took him a moment to become reacquainted with his environment as his mind was still half-lost in the lingering dream.

"A horde of terrifying... the smell, that filthy smell, I can never forget..." he muttered to himself. But his current reality caught up with him as he realized that it was about to get dark and he had no shelter for the night.

"The terror of last night cannot catch up to me out here tonight," he arose, panicking.

'I need to find shelter before it gets dark,' he thought to himself, but not wanting to leave without at least helping the mysterious stranger, he left

three mangoes and a knife where the person had been hiding. As he did, he thought to himself, 'Perhaps there is a village or settlement nearby. Maybe I will come across this person again. If not, I should find the settlement myself.'

Then, he departed and began searching for a cave. After a while of walking, he began to feel too tired to continue. Even though he felt relief, his leg was still in pretty bad shape.

So, he gave up the search and decided to repeat what he had done last night: climb the tallest tree he could possibly climb and sleep on one of the branches. But he quickly realized that he was unable to climb another tree this time, despite vines hanging from its thick branches. Upon finding a smaller tree, he realized there were no vines for him to hang on to for safety.

After giving up his search, he returned to the stream, hoping that its vicinity might offer a solution. As he walked along the banks, he spotted an African fig tree, its massive root system sprawling across the ground like a natural fortress.

'That might not be a bad idea,' he thought to himself. He got closer and began investigating the root system, where he found a hollow space large enough for him to crawl into. The interior was surprisingly dry and sheltered from the elements. Exhausted, he dragged himself inside, grateful for the protection it offered. Inside this natural shelter, Beleku finally found a place to rest. As he settled into the root system's embrace, his thoughts drifted back to the court's accusations, the flight through the night, and the mysterious figure he had seen earlier that day.

The day's events had taken a toll, but in this moment of respite, Beleku felt a glimmer of hope. He touched his foot, and while it still hurt, the poultice had worked; the pain had reduced, and he no longer felt feverish. For now, though, surviving the night was his only concern, and the African fig tree root system offered him a temporary refuge from the dangers that lurked outside.

He eventually drifted off to sleep again, finding himself back at the King's court, where he could hear Kola begin the divination process. The young mage cast the sacred palm nuts, his hands shaking, racked with nervousness. The patterns they formed were ambiguous to his untrained eye, but he felt the pressure of the expectant crowd.

He closed his eyes and prayed that when he opened them, he would understand what the oracle had shown him. But when he did, it was still cryptic, so he performed the divination again, and like before, he could not interpret the results of his divination. He sighed and thought to himself, 'This is a disgrace to my family. My father will disown me for disgracing him in front of the king.' A bead of sweat fell onto the wooden plaque. Then, a thought occurred to him. 'I will just tell them what they already know. This foolish boy is not innocent anyway.'

*I can't disappoint them. Not here, not now.*' He cleared his throat. "The orisha have spoken. Ifa has shown it to me." He shook his head, then looked up at Beleku. "How callous of you?"

Otun leaned forward, his eyes narrow. "K'ini Ifa ti wi?" (What has Ifa said?)

Ifakolapo hesitated for a heartbeat, then plunged ahead. "The signs are clear. This... this outcast has brought great shame upon our village."

Beleku's heart raced. 'No,' he thought, '*this can't be happening.*'

Ifakolapo continued, his voice gaining strength from the crowd's reaction. "Ifa reveals the truth we feared. He murdered Olujide in cold blood, guided by the evil forces in the depths of the forest that has long been his refuge from our community. He needs to be dealt with, lest he brings misfortune on the village."

The court erupted into a cacophony of gasps and murmurs as Ifakolapo delivered his verdict. The atmosphere was charged with disbelief and astonishment, as the onlookers struggled to comprehend the swift turn of events.

Even Beleku, the accused, was too stunned to utter a single word. He had braced himself for many outcomes, but the finality of Ifakolapo's declaration left him reeling. The young diviner's voice, laced with a feigned certainty, echoed ominously in his ears, sealing his fate before the gathered crowd. He looked up at Ajanaku, who looked extremely disappointed in him. Their eyes locked, and Ajanaku frowned. Beleku broke eye contact and continued to stare at the ground.

The Kabiyesi, his expression grave, nodded slowly in acknowledgment of the divination. "The voice of Ifá has spoken," he stated solemnly. "We must now consider the appropriate punishment for such a heinous crime."

Oludaare, still grieving and seeking justice for his slain brother, stood. "My lords, the loss of Olujide has left a void in our family that can never be

filled. The only recompense for such a vile act is for Beleku to face the ultimate punishment. He must be put to death."

A heavy silence fell over the court as the gravity of the suggestion weighed on every heart and mind present. After a long and tense deliberation, the council of chiefs and the Kabiyesi reached a consensus. The sentence would be death.

Baale, his voice steady but not without a trace of sorrow, addressed the guards. "Take this murderer back to his shackles. His fate has been decided."

As Beleku was dragged away in his dream, the scene began to blur and shift. The firm ground of the court gave way to soft, damp earth. The grip on his arms changed, becoming smaller yet incredibly strong.

Beleku's eyes snapped open, the remnants of the dream clinging to his consciousness like cobwebs. He was no longer in the court, but being dragged along the bank of the river. Panic surged through him as his mind struggled to reconcile dream and reality.

The moon hung low in the sky, casting an eerie glow over the scene. A foul stench assaulted his nostrils, so different from the musty air of his dream-court. As his senses slowly returned, Beleku realized with growing horror that the entity pulling him was unlike anything he had ever encountered.

Nothing made sense. He realized the entity pulling him was of small stature; its hands were scaly and too large in proportion to the rest of its body.

With a yell of terror that startled both him and his captor, the entity released its grip and vanished into the dense foliage of the forest. Seized by a primal urge for survival, Beleku scrambled to his feet and ran as if the very demons of the underworld were at his heels.

After running for a few seconds, he turned his head back to see if his captor was chasing him, but there was no one there. He slowly came to a halt and hid behind a tree, gasping for breath. It was only then, in the eerie calm that followed, that he noticed the pain in his leg had vanished mysteriously.

Beleku's hands trembled as he untied the adire, his breath catching in his throat as he revealed his foot. Where there should have been a gashing, festering wound, there was only smooth, unbroken skin.

Beleku stared at his unblemished foot, his mind reeling. "Impossible," he whispered, fingers tracing where the wound had been. "What manner of magic is this?" He looked around wildly, "Or am I truly losing my mind?"

A wave of dizziness washed over him. He fell back against a tree, sliding down to sit on the damp forest floor. "Ehh! Am I dreaming?" he exclaimed, his voice a mix of fear and wonder. He slapped his cheeks hard, the sting confirming his wakefulness.

"This can't be," he muttered, rubbing his foot vigorously, half-expecting the injury to reappear. "First the court, now this... what is happening to me?" A chill ran down his spine as he considered the implications. Had some forest spirit intervened? Or was he running mad.

Beleku peeked from behind the tree, looking in the direction he had come from; the entity was still nowhere to be found. There in the moonlight, he spotted the item he had seen during the day, glowing dimly in the moonlight. He could not make out what it was. Then, a breeze glided across the river bank, and the hem of the item fluttered in the wind. A stronger breeze followed, and the item rolled out. There was no doubt, it was clearly a mat.

"Was that the... child?" he muttered to himself. Then, it hit him.

As realization dawned, Beleku's initial terror gave way to a swirl of conflicting emotions. "Egbere," he shouted under his breath the word heavy on his tongue. Terror washed over him and he cringed at the thought of being touched by one. His body itched where the creature had touched him, disgust warring with a growing sense of... opportunity.

*'The mat,'* he thought, eyes fixed on the gently glowing object. *'They say it holds great power. Power enough to clear my name? No, to truly escape my miserable life.'* The legends of the Egbere's mat and the fortune that comes with it danced in his mind, tempting him with visions of redemption.

But doubt crept in. *'What if the stories are wrong? What if taking the mat brings a curse worse than what I already bear?'* He hesitated, years of caution warring with desperate need.

*'I have already lost everything,'* Beleku reasoned. As he thought to himself, the Egbere began to slowly walk back, returning to pick up its mat.

*'What more do I have to lose?'* He said in a low voice. With a deep breath, he steeled himself for action. Determined to possess it, he dashed from behind the tree like a bat out of hell.

After running for a few seconds, he turned his head back to see his captor was not running after him, but there was no one chasing him. He slowly came to a halt, and hid behind a tree, gasping for breath. It was only then, in the eerie calm that followed, that he noticed the pain in his leg had vanished mysteriously. He untied the adire, and took a look at his foot. The injury had vanished.

"Ehh! Am I dreaming??" he exclaimed, dazed and confused. He slapped himself across the cheeks to ensure he was no longer dreaming. He was in shock, rife with disbelief.

Beleku peeked from behind the tree, looking at the direction he was coming from, the entity was still nowhere to be found. There in the moonlight, he spotted the item he had seen during the day, glowing dimly in the moonlight, he could not make out what it was. Then, a breeze glided across the river bank, and the hem of the item fluttered in the wind. A stronger breeze followed, and the item rolled out. There was no doubt, it was clearly a mat.

"Was that the... child?" he muttered to himself, then, the realization hit him, "Egbere!" He shouted under his voice. Terror washed over him at the thought of being touched by one. He began to scratch his body out of disgust.

Then, right there in the moonlight, the Egberé began to slowly walk back, returning to pick up its mat. Beleku had heard various myths surrounding the creatures, but most importantly, about the powers that came with possessing the mat of an Egberé. Determined to possess it, he dashed from behind the tree like a bat out of hell.

When the Egberé saw what was about to happen, it too began to dash for the mat, but Beleku was too fast. He dove for it at the last second, crashing into the ground and rolling to a stop, the mat in his clutches. He rose from the dirt and took a combat stance, ready to go, should the Egberé attack, but it did not. As soon as it saw that Beleku had gained possession of the mat, it began to scream.

Beleku's heart raced as he clutched the mat. '*What have I done?*' he thought, a mix of triumph and terror coursing through him. '*I've touched the forbidden, stolen from a creature of legend. What now? I must face the music.*'

The cries were different from what he had heard the previous night, but there was no mistaking it. The terrifying cries from last night definitely came from it, or its kind. The screams were disorienting, they were so loud from up close that Beleku almost could not stop himself from dropping the mat to cover his ears, but he resisted the urge.

This continued for a while, until Beleku suddenly began to feel dizzy, he staggered, but he had enough willpower to keep standing. He felt a warm liquid roll from his ear unto his neck. He touched his neck with his left index finger, still gripping onto the mat with his right hand like a mad man. He acquired a sample of the liquid and raised it to the moonlight to see what it was. His ears had begun to bleed.

When the Egbere saw that Beleku refused to drop the mat, it stopped screaming. Next, it resorted to feigned violence. It charged at Beleku then it stopped and began to circle him like a cat. Its movements both graceful and unsettling. Its scaly hands, disproportionately large for its small frame, flexed as if itching to snatch back the mat.

Beleku followed, never taking his sights off the entity. Beleku knew that as long as he was in possession of the mat, the Egbere could not lay its hands on him, it could only bark, but it could not bite.

## **An Unshakable Shigidi**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Beleku was still dazed from the earlier events of the night. There was so much going on, so, he began assessing his surroundings and trying to calm himself down.

He maintained a defensive stance, ready for anything the Egbere could throw at him. The moon shined brightly that night, and he realized they were still on the banks of the same river, but despite covering a large distance by the river bank, he realized he had not been to this part of the river.

‘This... thing must have dragged me for a long time before I woke up.’ he thought to himself. Then, his eyes drifted to the water, he noticed something different. The water was green, and certain parts of it glowed. Then, his eyes traced the sands from the banks to his feet and that was when he first realized, the soil was as black as charcoal. He looked up at the trees to then notice that all the leaves were all red.

When he had calmed down some more, he observed the creature in front of him. It was barely 3 feet tall, its hands were scaly, and the scales gave way to an abnormal amount of hair on the upper parts of its arms. Its feet were equally scaly as its hands, but its leg were very hairy.

‘What a terrifyingly ugly creature’ Beleku muttered.

It was as though the Egbere had heard him, because it immediately frowned and began screaming/screeching again.

The Egbere wore a sack as clothing, with various amulets and charms tied around its waist. Beleku was scared that the Egbere might begin using these charms on him, but the Egbere never did.

He took his eyes off the Egbere and looked at the sole of his foot in disbelief. It was as though he had never gotten injured. He felt stronger than he did when he had left the village, and his senses seemed unnaturally sharp. Every rustle of leaves, every subtle shift in the air caught his attention. He was hyper-alert, his body taut with tension and readiness.

It had been hours since their initial encounter. The creature seemed tireless, its large red eyes never wavering from Beleku's form. At intervals, the Egbere would let out another bone-chilling scream, clearly trying to catch Beleku off guard. Each time, the young man felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, but he stubbornly held his ground, refusing to drop the mat.

When the wailing had become almost unbearable, Beleku had tried a desperate gambit. He attempted to run off with the mat, hoping to put some distance between himself and the creature. But to his dismay, every time he moved, the Egbere kept the exact same pace as him, neither falling behind nor gaining ground. It was as if an invisible tether bound them together.

He ran until his lungs hurt and his legs ached. Realizing the futility of his escape attempt, he stopped running and slumped against a nearby tree, his chest heaving as he caught his breath.

As he sat there, his eyes fell upon the hollow of the tree. Inside, he spotted the remnants of an old beehive, abandoned by its inhabitants but still

containing traces of beeswax. An idea struck him then, a potential respite from the Egbere's relentless assault on his senses.

Beleku reached for the beeswax. He worked it between his fingers, softening it, before carefully shaping it to fit his ear canal. As he pushed the makeshift earplugs into place, the forest around him fell into a blessed silence. The Egbere's mouth opened wide in what must have been another piercing scream, but Beleku heard nothing but a muffled vibration. He felt relief.

At this point, the moon was starting to set, and the tension and rush he felt was starting to ebb away. He began to notice subtle things about the Egbere, its body language, the masked aggressive screaming, all betrayed by a nervousness that mirrored Beleku's own fear.

So, he decided to test this theory. He suddenly lurched forward, feigning a charge at the Egbere. To his surprise, the creature cowered, its small frame seeming to shrink even further as it flinched away from him.

Emboldened by this reaction, Beleku attempted communication once more. "Stop it!" he called out, his voice firm despite his exhaustion. "Stop the screaming. I don't want to hurt you!"

Beleku took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Stop! I don't want to hurt you!" he called out, his voice wavering slightly. "I know you want this mat. But I need it too. Can't we... can't we talk about this?"

The Egbere's red eyes narrowed, its mouth opening in what Beleku assumed would be another scream.

Beleku quickly continued, "Wait! Please. I'm not your enemy. I'm just... lost. Scared. Like you, maybe?" He gestured at the mat. "This... this could save me. No, I need it. But I don't want to hurt you either."

The Egberé tilted its head, a flicker of something—curiosity? Understanding?—passing through its eyes.

The Egberé's response was another ear-splitting screech. But this time, Beleku noticed something different. As it screamed, the creature pointed insistently at the mat clutched in Beleku's hands. The creature's eyes—large, red-rimmed from endless weeping. Despite its monstrous appearance, there was something almost pitiful in its gaze.

He responded, softening his tone "First, stop screaming, it won't work on me anymore. If you do, maybe I'll give you the mat back."

As the first light of dawn stretched across the sky, Beleku felt some relief. His brow furrowed as he studied the creature. 'It's afraid,' he realized with a start. 'As afraid as I am, maybe more.' The thought was oddly comforting, humanizing this otherworldly being. 'We're both lost, aren't we? Both fighting for something we don't fully understand.'

As the sun rose into the sky, it brought with it a scorching heat that beat down mercilessly on everything it touched. The forest came alive with the buzz of insects and calls of birds. Beleku's stomach growled in response, a harsh reminder of how long it had been since he'd eaten a proper meal.

Beleku took in the surreal landscape, a chill ran down his spine despite the oppressive heat. The black soil, red leaves, and glowing green water seemed

to mock everything he knew about the natural world. No way he was going to eat or drink anything here.

*'Where am I? Have I stepped into the realm of the spirits?' he wondered, a mixture of awe and terror gripping him. 'Or has my ordeal finally driven me mad?'* He closed his eyes tight, then opened them again, half-expecting—hoping—the alien scenery would vanish. But the unnatural colors remained, a vivid reminder of how far he'd strayed from the world he knew.

Sweat poured down parts of Beleku's body that he did not know he could sweat through. He wanted to take off his buba, but did not want to relinquish his hold on the mat, so, he lodged the mat between his thighs as he stripped off the garment.

The afternoon heat brought with it new torments. Sweat stung Beleku's eyes, and his parched throat ached for water. Even the Egbere seemed affected, its movements becoming slower, more lethargic.

The dance between the two continued throughout the day. The Egbere maintaining constant vigil, keeping the exact pace from him. As evening approached, Beleku was starting to get exhausted, but he couldn't show any sign of weakness.

He cautiously began searching for sustenance, scanning the expansive forest for anything edible. After what felt like hours, he spotted a black plum tree, and he got excited, but his excitement evaporated as he drew closer. The tree was nearly bare, and only a few edible fruits clung to its branches.

He gathered the few he could find on the ground and the branches and ate them, then, he supplemented the pitiful meal with edible leaves he recognized from his foraging knowledge.

As night fell, the Egbere changed tactics. It would occasionally vanish into the canopy above, only to suddenly appear in front of Beleku, causing him to stumble in surprise.

Yet, despite these attempts to unnerve him, the creature never once made physical contact. It was as if some unspoken rule or invisible barrier prevented it from touching Beleku directly.

This gave Beleku confidence to walk without having to constantly keep his eyes on the Egbere. He began hiking, he reached a part of the forest where the foliage above was so thick, the forest floor was covered in complete darkness, despite the full moon above.

He eventually came into an area of the forest that was more familiar to him. The moon beamed on the forest floor, and here, the leaves were a comforting green, and the soil beneath his feet was the rich brown he was accustomed to.

Exhausted, hungry, and increasingly bewildered by the Egbere's behavior, Beleku trudged on. The mat, still clutched tightly in his hands, seemed to grow heavier with each passing hour. To keep awake, he found an opening in the foliage where he began to count the stars. As he did, he realized how his entire life had been flipped upside down in just 7 days, here he was keeping what was supposed to be a mythical creature hostage.

## **Serenity in Chaos**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

The relentless dance between Beleku and the Egbere continued into the following day. The Egbere had begun to show signs of fatigue as well, its movements less fluid, its eyes dulled by exhaustion.

As the sun climbed higher, the forest came alive with the buzz of insects and calls of birds. Beleku's stomach growled in response, a harsh reminder of how long it had been since he'd eaten a proper meal.

Around noon, the sky opened up, releasing a torrent of rain that drenched the forest. Beleku, driven by instinct, sought shelter beneath the sprawling branches of a massive tree. Through it all, the Egbere's gaze never wavered from Beleku and the precious mat.

When the rain has subsided, Beleku watched in surprise and disgust as the Egbere brought out one of the mangoes he had left for it two days prior. It devoured the now rotting fruit with relish.

Beleku's own stomach growled in protest as he began to also search for fresh food. He drank rain water from large leaves as he wandered the forest.

The screaming had finally ceased for good, giving way to long stretches of silence where both of them simply stared at each other. Beleku became captivated by the life teeming around them. He had spent a lot of time in the forests, but he had always been after something, never taking the time to be with the forest.

There were tree trunks large enough to hold five people in them, leaving enough space for them to move around. Vines hung from hundreds of feet, and colorful birds darted through the canopy, singing melodies that echoed through the trees. He witnessed the culmination of the courtship of a pair of African Paradise Flycatchers, swaying together in mid-air dances, exchanging melodies.

He stopped and looked back at the Egbere to find that it had also joined in watching when all of a sudden, the peaceful atmosphere was shattered by a piercing screech. When Beleku realized it did not come from the Egbere, his heart lept to his mouth.

But his fear was assuaged when he looked up and saw a troop of red-capped mangabeys swinging through the trees. One of the monkeys observed the odd pair with a mixture of curiosity and wariness before vanishing into the leafy depths.

Insects and butterflies flew around, all part of an ecosystem, all living individual lives, but their actions coming together to make the forest alive.

## ***Food is a language***

As night fell, the forest came alive with the scurrying of small creatures on the floors, bats flying overhead, crickets chirping. Beleku watched, transfixed, when suddenly, the Egbere sprang into action, catching a plump squirrel and snapping its neck in one fluid motion. Without hesitation, it tore into its prey, sharp teeth rending flesh from bone.

Beleku recoiled, his stomach churning. The Egbere paused mid-bite, its yellow eyes meeting Beleku's gaze. For a moment, they stood frozen, the weight of unspoken differences heavy between them. The Egbere alternated its gaze from the squirrel and back, then, it leapt into the trees.

Moments later, it returned, clutching an even larger squirrel. With surprising gentleness, it dropped the lifeless creature at Beleku's feet before resuming its feast.

Beleku's hunger battled with his revulsion. 'I can't... not like that,' he muttered, before he finally had enough and cried out, "Stop!", unable to bear the sight any longer. An idea struck him, and he carefully removed his buba, using the garment to secure the mat to his back. Testing its stability with a few experimental movements, he then set about gathering kindling.

As he nurtured a small fire to life, the Egbere watched with fascination. Beleku cautiously approached the Egbere and gently collected the mangled squirrel from its grasp. Beleku roasted the squirrels on a sharpened stick,

the aroma making his mouth water despite his earlier revulsion. When the meat was done, he offered it to the Egbere.

The egbere hesitantly collected it, its head cocked in curiosity. It sniffed the meat and its eyes lit up, but it still regarded the cooked flesh with skepticism. Only after Beleku had taken a bite of his own portion did it accept, devouring the meal with unbridled enthusiasm. No sooner had it finished than it darted off again, returning with a galago whose head it had unceremoniously smashed.

Beleku's gorge rose. The bushbaby was not an animal anyone in his village would consider food. Still, he prepared the meat for the Egbere, though he couldn't bring himself to partake.

As the Egbere finished its second meal, Beleku seized the moment to attempt communication. Pointing at his previously injured foot, he mimed, "I was hurt." Rubbing the now-healed sole, he added, "But now, I am well." He then pointed at the Egbere and asked, "Was it you who healed me?"

To his amazement, the creature nodded, gesturing at a small gourd hanging from its waist.

"Why?" Beleku questioned, his voice barely above a whisper.

The Egbere responded by producing one of the mango seeds Beleku had shared earlier, pointing back at him.

"The mangos... an exchange," Beleku murmured, understanding dawning. "Thank you," he said, bowing deeply.

The Egbere nodded, a flicker of something almost human in its eyes. A companionable silence fell between them, broken only when the creature began to weep once more, gesturing plaintively at the mat on Beleku's back.

Beleku found himself considering the request, his fingers moving to untie the knots. But before he could finish, a low growl froze him in place. The Egbere's cries ceased, replaced by a warning scream that sent chills down Beleku's spine.

He whirled around to find a wild boar pawing the ground, preparing to charge. With a burst of adrenaline, Beleku leapt aside just as the beast thundered past, its tusk splintering against a tree trunk. Dazed and injured, the boar retreated into the underbrush, leaving behind the heavy scent of fear and aggression.

Heart pounding, Beleku gathered his meager belongings and extinguished the fire. He set off once more, the Egbere a constant shadow at his side.

### **Unshackled**

They wandered through the night until they eventually ended up at a cleared path cutting through the dense foliage—a road, a lifeline back to civilization. Beleku was hopeful, this path was a promise of an escape from the forest's endless green twilight.

As the morning light began streaking through the sky, they came to a fork in the path. Here, fate dealt another unexpected hand. As soon as they reached the path, the Egbere began to chitter restlessly. A group of bandits

materialized from the shadows, their sudden appearance causing Beleku's breath to catch in his throat. In an instant, the Egberes vanished, leaving Beleku to face the threat alone.

The bandits' focus zeroed in on Beleku. He counted six of them: three brothers of fair complexion wearing similar clothes, and two darker-skinned men and one a huge hunchback who looked like a recent recruit.

The eldest brother, his face marked by a jagged scar, stepped forward with a predatory grin. "What do we have here, boys? A lone traveler." His voice was rough, like gravel underfoot.

"No, he's not alone," the second brother interjected, his eyes darting nervously around Beleku. "What was that? I saw a shigidi with my own eyes just now. Was that a statue? Where is it!?"

The eldest scoffed, raised his hands in the air and said, "I told you to lay off that calabash of palmwine, you didn't listen. Now you're seeing things."

"No, he's right," the youngest brother chimed in, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "I thought my eyes were playing tricks, but I definitely saw something too."

The leader paused, his scarred face contorting in thought. After a moment, he fixed his gaze on Beleku. "What is that you have there?"

Beleku remained silent, his grip tightening on the mat. The hunchback spoke for the first time, "That looks like a mat, but it's shiny!" his deep voice belying the fact that he spoke with the cadence of a child.

The eldest brother looked curiously at Beleku and said in a thoughtful manner, "Shigidi..."

The youngest brother chimed in, "...and a strange glistening mat..."

The eldest brother turned around and locked eyes with his younger brother, who then said what they had both been thinking... "Egbere?"

Beleku's grip tightening on the mat. The youngest brother's eyes widened in realization. The other bandits, save for the eldest, erupted into laughter. The second brother called the youngest a "dodoyo," while one of the recruits dared to slap him on the back of his head.

The second brother, noticing the eldest's stoic expression, tapped his brother. "Did you hear what he said? He said Egbere!" Then he burst into another bout of laughter.

When no response came, he pressed on, "Wait, don't tell me you believe in that rubbish. Those are fairy tales... Wow, I thought you were the smarter one."

The eldest brother's eyes returned to Beleku as he questioned his siblings. "You said you saw something moving with him in the bushes, small like a shigidi?" The brothers confirmed, exchanging uneasy glances.

"We've seen stranger things in this forest before," the youngest added, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Like the night we saw the trees walking on their roots."

The eldest brother turned to the youngest. "What's that myth about the mat of the Egberé?"

"If you hold it for 7 days," the youngest replied, his eyes gleaming, "you will become wealthy beyond your dreams."

A slow, cruel smile spread across the eldest brother's face. "Well, we can take the mat from him. If after 7 days nothing happens, we will sell it to a king. Which king wouldn't want to sleep on such a beautiful mat? Or we could become..." He gestured to the youngest, who eagerly finished, "...wealthier beyond our dreams!"

"Besides," one of the recruits piped up, finding his voice, "he doesn't seem to have anything else of value."

"Take it!" the hunchback echoed, emboldened by the prospect of easy riches.

The scarred bandit dropped his blade and took a menacing step toward Beleku, his voice rough like gravel. "Hand over the mat"

Beleku tightened his grip on the mat, shaking his head. "This mat is mine. I can't give it to you." His voice trembled slightly, but there was steel in his eyes.

The scarred bandit's lip curled into a sneer. "Foolish man. Do you know what we do to those who refuse us?"

"Please," Beleku pleaded, trying to steady his voice. "I don't want any trouble. Just let me pass."

"You have to do better than that," the second bandit snarled. "The mat, now!"

"Alakori, it's not worth your life. Hand it over, or we will take it from your dead body" said the dark skinned man, "... but we don't want to stain such a beautiful mat with your blood", he added.

They closed in, hands grasping at the mat tied to Beleku's back. Beleku took a step back, his mind racing for a way out. Clutching the mat with all his strength, he pleaded, "I can't. This mat... it's..."

Just as hope began to fade, the Egbere reappeared in a blur of motion. It poured the contents of a small gourd into its mouth, then spat a vicious stream of saliva onto the eldest bandit's grasping hands.

The effect was immediate and horrifying. Flesh sizzled and bubbled where the caustic liquid touched. The second brother, in a panic, tried to wipe the substance on his buba, only to have it eat through the fabric and into his abdomen. The saliva fell on the eldest brother's leg, and his foot began to dissolve before their very eyes.

The remaining bandits fled in terror, disappearing down one of the roads, leaving their screaming comrades behind. Beleku looked on in horror, at first too perplexed to move. When he regained his composure and was about to dash onto the other route, the eldest brother called out, "Wait!"

Beleku hesitated, and the brother said, "Don't leave me..." Spitting blood from his mouth, he begged, "Please, kill me... end my pain."

Beleku stood, shocked. He looked down at the blade the bandit had dropped earlier, but as he reached for it, the Egbere picked up a large rock and raised it high.

Time seemed to slow. Beleku's vision swam, the world around him blurring into a cacophony of screams and the sickening crunch of bone. His last conscious thought was of the Egbere's yellow eyes, gleaming with an otherworldly light.

When Beleku awoke, he found himself on his knees, surrounded by the bodies of the bandits. All were present save for the youngest brother. Next to him lay a blood-stained club, its weight a grim testament to the violence that had transpired. The Egbere stood, panting a few paces away, blood dripping from the bandit's blade he was now clutching.

Beleku's heart was racing, he scrambled to his feet, nearly losing his balance as a wave of nausea washed over him. He stumbled towards a nearby stream, desperate to wash away the evidence of what had occurred.

As he fell to his knees by the water's edge, Beleku finally looked at his hands. A cry of anguish escaped his lips as he saw they were covered in

blood. "Why?" he whispered, his voice cracking. "Why are my hands covered in blood?"

Panic seized him as the implications of his bloodied state became clear. With frantic movements, he plunged his hands into the cool water, scrubbing furiously at the crimson stains. As he leaned forward to splash water on his face, he caught sight of his reflection. His face and clothes were covered in blood, transforming him into a gruesome specter of violence.

"No, no, no," Beleku muttered, his voice rising with each repetition. He scrubbed harder, as if he could wash away not just the blood, but the very memory of what had happened.

After what felt like an eternity, Beleku dared to look at his reflection again. To his horror, he saw not his own face, but that of the Egberé staring back at him. He whirled around, finding the creature standing behind him, its small form also covered in blood, still clutching the bandit's blade.

A scream tore from Beleku's throat as he fell backwards into the stream. "E gba mi o! Mo gbe o!" he cried out. "Iru agbako wo mo wa pade yii. Kini mo fowo mi fa yi o. Olodumare, yo mi kuro ninu igbo buruku yi, aginju yi o yemi. Jowo!" (Someone save me! I have become unfortunate! What kind of misfortune have I run into? What have I wrought with my own hands? The almighty Lord of the Heavens, liberate me from this terrible forest. I don't deserve this wilderness of suffering. I beg.)

The Egberé stood motionless, a mix of tears and blood streaming down its now red eyes fixed on Beleku with an unreadable expression. Then,

suddenly, it cocked its head to the side, as if listening to something Beleku couldn't hear. The sound of a young boy's voice, faint but unmistakable, drifted through the trees.

Without making a sound, the Egberé began to walk towards the voice. Beleku, driven by a mix of fear and desperate curiosity, scrambled to his feet and followed. As they approached, the muffled cries became clearer, though the words remained indistinguishable.

They found a young boy bound to a tree, a gag muffling his pleas, his eyes were wide with terror above the muzzle.

Beleku lunged forward. "Hold still," he rasped, his voice strange in his own ears. "I'm going to get you out. But as he reached for the boy's bonds, a horrible thought struck him.

His hands, the hands of a killer, touching this innocent child... he recoiled, a moan of despair tore through his throat as he buried his face in his hands, heaving with silent sobs.

The boy had clearly been crying, but a new stream began to flow as he clearly could not comprehend what was happening. This blood covered man and the strange creature menacingly staring at him.

Slowly, through the haze of his misery, he became aware of another sound. A soft, mournful keening, a sound of despair to mirror his own.

He raised his head. There, crouched, was the Egberé. It stared at him, its weeping eyes filled with a sorrow so profound it stole Beleku's breath. The

Egbere approached the child, and Beleku's heart leapt into his throat. He didn't know what to expect from the unpredictable creature.

"Fisile!" (Leave him alone!) he screamed, but the Egbere paid him no heed. As the creature raised the blade, Beleku closed his eyes, unable to watch. The sound of metal slicing through air filled his ears, followed by... silence.

Beleku opened his eyes to find the boy free and unharmed, the ropes that had bound him now lying in severed pieces on the forest floor. Relief washed over him, but it was tempered by the fear he saw reflected in the child's wide eyes.

"Bawo lo se de ibi?" (How did you get here?) Beleku asked gently, trying to keep his voice steady. The boy refused to answer, his necked flexed as though his throat had been sealed in terror.

"Go," Beleku whispered. "Go, before..."

The boy hesitated. Then, with a final, fearful glance, he turned and fled, disappearing into the trees.

But rather than answer, the boy sprang to his feet and disappeared into the bushes, leaving Beleku and the Egbere alone once more in the eerie quiet of the forest.

As the sound of the boy's retreating footsteps faded, Beleku turned to the Egbere. The creature met his gaze, and for a moment, an unspoken understanding passed between them. They were bound together now. Beleku checked the mat, still tightly tied to his back.

As they walked, Beleku couldn't shake the nagging doubt that gnawed at the edges of his mind. What had happened with the bandits? Was there something buried deep within himself, that he had yet to confront? The blood on his hands told one story, but the Egbere's presence hinted at another. Which was the truth? And was he ready to face it?

[CONTINUATION FOR AFTER THEY COME ACROSS EKANEM AGAIN]

"Yoruba... mo mo kekere" (Yoruba... I know a little) the boy managed, his gaze darting nervously between Beleku and the Egbere, confused by the pair and their odd looks.

In halting, broken Yoruba, the boy introduced himself: "Oruko mi Ekanem, mo wa Oritameje ni ilu." (My name is Ekanem, and I am looking for the village of Oritameje.)

## **Chapter 6: The Apostate and The Exiled**

### ***The Apostate - Hope***

The priest (Okeoghene) awoke suddenly, his heart was pounding against his chest like a drum in the dead of night. His back was glued to the mat, and there was so much sweat, it felt like he had taken a dip in the stream and then laid on the mat.

He tried to scream, but his voice failed him, he tried to move and his limbs refused his attempts. He found breathing difficult, and his chest tightened with each breath he managed to take.

The edges of his vision were blurred, as a result of sleep crust and the remnant of sleep clouding his eyes. However, in the corner of the room, a dark figure stood, the figure wore the armor of the Omi soldier he had fought in the forest. The figure held a club made from bones and began to slowly inch closer to him. Panic clawed at his spine, and his throat closed.

Suddenly, the mat with which he covered the door into the hut patted, allowing some light into the hut for a split second. The priest's eyes darted to the door, but by then, the mat had fallen back in place and the room was dark again, then, a familiar voice called his name.

The priest could not tell which was more terrifying, the monster he could see, or the disembodied voice calling his name. As the person got closer, the terror enveloped him and he thought he was going to die.

As the entity by the door approached, his mind flashed through visions of the attack, and now the two figures looming over him. He tried to focus, to see who it was through the haze, but his vision failed him. It had been three days since the massacre took place, and he was certain that he was the sole survivor, so, who could this person be?

Then, he felt a hand grip him firmly by the shoulder, drawing him out of the depths of his terror and dread back to reality. He could finally move his limbs, and as soon as he could, he sat up to the familiar face of a young man.

“Idoreyin?” he murmured softly.

“Yes” the young man responded. The priest began to clear out the sleep crust from his eyes, and then, he asked with an uncertain voice, “Am... am I dead?”, but before he could get an answer, one of the babies began to cry. The piercing sound of the cry was a relief to the priest, an answer to his question.

Idoreyin jumped up, stunned by the sudden piercing noise. The priest rose and walked to the window, cracking it open for just enough light to get in, then, he walked to the basket. He picked up the baby and began to comfort it before the fuss could wake up the other baby. He managed to pacify the baby, then he placed her back in the basket.

Idoreyin began to speak, “You are alive! And the babies, whose babies are those? Are those...” but the priest cut him off. “How are you here right

now?” he questioned, “Are you alone?” he said, as he slowly slipped to the side, pulling a cutlass from under the mat and pointing it at Idoreyin.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” he said in a low voice, “Are you working with them? Tell me! Are you alone, or I swear by Ekpeyong, I will spill your blood over this hut.” Idoreyin was shocked. He looked more disappointed than perplexed.

“Why would you accuse me of such?” he said, falling to his knees, the priest stepped closer and Idoreyin closed his eyes tightly and began to quiver. He replied, “I am not alone... but I am not with the enemy either.” he raised his hands and spread them wide open, saying “Please... don’t kill me. All I’ve done is sa-save a few lives.”

When the priest heard this, he felt bad, and he lowered the cutlass, then, he said, “Get up.” Idoreyin opened his eyes and slowly began to get up from his knees, still quivering. When he got up, his pants were wet, he had peed himself.

The priest felt a little embarrassed and without saying a word, he went to the corner of the hut and rifled through a few clothes, then, he found a pair of pants and offered it to Idoreyin, and the young man reluctantly accepted it.

The priest stood off to the side, looking away, so Idoreyin could change out of the wet pants, but still keeping Idoreyin in his peripheral vision. He

began to speak, “So, you said you saved some lives?” the priest asked. Idoreyin nodded.

“Tell me, how did you survive, and where are the people you saved?” the priest asked, and Idoreyin began to speak, he said.

“First of all, the survivors are all hiding in the town hall. I told them to remain while I searched through the village for survivors.” Idoreyin sat on the floor and then began his story, “On that day, I had rested in the day, with plans of fishing that night, but because of the storm, I decided to not go fishing. But because I had slept during the day, I knew it would be a long night trying to get sleep. So, I decided to mend my net instead. I went outside to get my net, but I did not carry a torch, because I thought it would be unnecessary.”

Idoreyin stopped and leaned towards the door where he folded the mat to let in some air and light through. The priest did not protest. Then, he returned to his sitting position.

“While I was out, I noticed a torch wading through the thicket of the forest. I stopped to observe who it was, and as soon as the man carrying the torch made it out of the forest, another man poured water over the torch dousing it. And that was when I saw them, silhouettes of many soldiers streaming out of the forest. My first instinct was to shout, but I stopped when I heard the voice of another man, which I’m certain was Okon’s shouting, ‘Raiders! Raiders!! Everybody wake up!’ and I’m certain he was killed almost

immediately.” Idoreyin stopped to catch his breath, and a tear ran down his face.

“I ran back, waking people up as silently as I could, and I sent them in the direction of my boat.” he stopped again, as though the story was getting harder to tell by the sentence.

“My sister’s hut was the last one I went to, but when I got there, the attackers were already there. I saw my sister marching out of her hut with her daughter.” then, he burst into tears.

The priest was getting uncomfortable, he knew where the story was going, because he laid the mother and daughter to rest. The soldiers had had their way with the young girl and killed her after.

“It’s okay,” the priest said, rising from the bench and bringing Idoreyin up to his feet and consoling him, after he had cried for a bit, he said, “If you were the one that put them to rest, then, you saw...” he broke off from the priest and slamming his foot into the ground in regret, he said, “I watched! When I saw it happen, I froze, and I did nothing... I just stood there and I watched.” then, he fell to the ground again, and continued “...when they started coming my way, I ran like a coward... no, I was a coward.”

The priest picked him up again and consoled him, then, he took the man to the spot where he had laid them to rest. He could not tell the man that it was a mass grave, but he was sure Idoreyin could see that. He then said, “I will give you some space so you can spend a minute with them.” he said,

gripping the man by the shoulders. He then said, “I will be waiting with the others.” to which Idoreyin nodded.

The priest then, began to walk to the town hall, but after a few paces, he stopped, then, he requested Idoreyin’s discretion about the babies. Idoreyin agreed, and the priest continued on his way to meet with the rest of the survivors. On his way there, the priest began to think of that night again, and he could not get the image of flies perching on the soldier’s eyes and exposed brain out of his head.

When he made it to the town hall [?.add speech here. He basically consoles them and tells them he is taking them to one of the other fishing villages in the area. He tells them they will go find help and possibly find long term shelter]. The priest, unsure of what to do next—he could not stay back at the village and he could not tell the people about the babies, lied to the villagers. He told them that he had a sacrifice to complete to ensure that the gods protected them from all future harm, and for this reason, he had to ride on a different vessel than them. [list out the survivors?.]

He asked one of the survivors for pap, and was able to get her to make him enough pap to feed the children for at least three days, even if it would be mostly solid, he could heat it up.

### ***The Apostate - A listening ear***

On the edge of what used to be the docks, the priest, with the help of Idoreyin was making a small raft from flat pieces of wood and reeds. The

soldiers had destroyed the docks and released all the boats to sea, to ensure none of the captives could leave on boats, even if they escaped their captivity. The two men worked in silence.

Idoreyin broke the silence, saying to the priest, “You lied to them about the babies,” then, looking around to make sure no one was nearby, he continued, “You didn’t want to tell me earlier, but they are the rebel’s babies, aren’t they?”

The priest took a deep breath and responded, “Yes, they are.” He said, as he tied a knot with a rope fashioned out of an old fishing net. “But it isn’t what you think.” He tied a knot with a rope fashioned out of an old fishing net. “But it isn’t what you think.”

Idoreyin replied by saying, “Then, tell me... are they your children?” he pointed towards the hut and continued, “They are twin children, and they are *days* old.”

The priest stopped and considered telling him, then shook his head and bent down to continue his work. As he looked down, he saw a large piece of wood, one of the small logs tied together to secure the edge of the dock. It was small but large enough to use as a club.

For a split second, the priest’s mind drifted, imagining picking up the club and killing Idoreyin. That would be the end of it, and no one else would know about the babies. He could tell the survivors that he and Idoreyin were attacked at the dock. But then his mind flashed back to the combat in

the forest, the club his enemy wielded, and the bodies of Idoreyin's sister and niece. Catching himself, he bit into his lip with frustration, drawing blood.

Irodeyin got closer and then said, "You can trust me. At the very least, I owe you for putting my family to rest. The least I could do is offer you a listening ear." The priest let out a sigh, shook his head, and began to laugh like a madman, revealing his blood-stained teeth.

"You have no idea what I've seen in the last few days. Nobody cares about a listening ear, I am just not trying to relive memories that can lead to madness." he said, grabbing the net from Irodeyin and yelling, "Go away!" Irodeyin smiled, got up and stared at the priest. Then, he stopped and said, "I left one detail out about that night... Given that you were about to kill me inside that hut, I didn't feel it necessary to tempt death." he said, then, he backed up to a safe distance and continued.

"I saw you that night." Upon hearing this, the priest's countenance changed, his eyebrows furrowed, and his mouth opened slightly. "I didn't come out to get my net. I was out there watching the water. Thinking about jumping into it and letting the currents drown me, like I'd done many times in the past year.

"This time, I was actually about to jump, but then, I saw you. You were alone with that baby, and I saw you look into its eyes with pity. I saw you cradle it in your arms, but when your guards returned, you stopped and you

shunned the baby and handed it to one of the guards. Which makes me ask, did you fail to take the baby into the forest like you should have?”

A second after, he continued again, “There are so many things that should have been done that night, and I am the last person alive capable of blaming you for not doing things you should have done.”

The priest sighed and stared at the sky, then, he raised his hands and began to speak, “I did... I took the babies into the forest, to the exact spot that I always did. There was a lot of water, so I put the baby on a flat piece of bark, and placed it between two rocks, so that it wouldn’t drown. But before the end of the night, it did... I don’t know how.”

The priest stopped, picked up a rock and tossed it across the surface of the water, then, he continued, explaining his night and his experience with Abeni in the cave, explaining why it was important to him that the children survived.

Idoreyin was shocked by this story but showed no disbelief. He offered a word of comfort to the priest saying, “You did what you thought was right. That’s all any of us can hope to do. Sometimes, we find we were awfully wrong, but the only positive thing people like like you and me can do with the time we have left is to make sure we do only what we are sure is right. For we have lost the right to do what we THINK is right.”

Then, he looked at the raft and said, “We will need a way to keep the babies fasted to the raft, and a shelter to protect them from the sun.” he said,

pointing at the sky. Irodeyin returned a few minutes later with supplies and two massive gourds.

He tied the gourds together firmly and made a soft base with reeds. Then, he secured the gourds to the raft and covered them with black cloths, fastening the cloth to the top of each with a rope. He pushed a small hole through the edge to allow access. Pointing at the gourds, he said, “This is where you will keep them. The villagers will see the gourds and assume they are filled with concoctions.”

“We will go to Obutong as planned. When we get there, you will go with the rest of the survivors to get them situated. I will guard the children with my life while you do that. When you are ready, return to the boat, and I will take you to your destination, wherever it may be.”

For the first time since that night, the priest smiled.

### ***The Apostate - A new journey***

Before sunset, the raft was ready. The survivors all got on the boat, while the priest boarded the raft, which was towed behind the ship by a thick rope. As they neared their destination, it was getting dark.

One of the survivors stood up and told Idoreyin to stop the boat, which he promptly did. The man called their attention to the docks; they had been destroyed, just like the ones at their village. This wasn't a safe haven—the invasion hadn't ended at their village. Of course, why would it?

"We need to turn around," a woman said, to which several people on the boat agreed. The priest couldn't hear everything they were saying, but he could make out that they were asking to turn around. In the midst of the commotion, the woman began to cry out loud.

The villagers tried to quiet her to avoid exposing their location, but she pointed, and from the trees along the water's edge, arrows began to fly in their direction, one striking the man in the eye.

Idoreyin immediately ran to the back, cutting the rope that tied the raft to the boat. He gave the priest a nod before an arrow struck the back of his neck and came out through his nose. The priest laid flat on the raft and vehemently paddled out of the way with the oar. The sudden drift to the side, however, caused the larger container holding the babies' pap to fall into the water with a splash.

The splash was loud, and he heard arrows fly by above. The priest turned to look behind him, and that was when he saw the strangest thing. He observed figures running from further inland, their movement was erratic and desperate.

Without hesitation, these figures began to jump into the water, splashing wildly.

Most of them couldn't swim, but they thrashed towards him with unsettling determination. In the dim light, he managed to get a glimpse of the grotesque sight of the soldiers—one had a sword lodged through his skull, his gaze was fixated in the general direction of the priest, but soon, more of them piled on this soldier, and he was soon submerged. The priest's mouth fell open and terror climbed in, leaving his mouth agape.

He stood and began to furiously row away, the oar slicing through the water as he fled. When he reached a dark incline in the waterway, he hid, clinging to the stems of plants growing along the banks. His breath came in ragged gasps as he listened intently. As he stood there, a thought crossed his mind, 'I have led the only survivors of my village to their deaths,' and a terrible sadness overwhelmed him.

Amid the rustling leaves and distant splashes, he heard a man's voice quietly pleading for help. The priest cautiously climbed out of the raft, wading through the bush until he found the source—a man, missing 2/3s of his left leg, his face twisted in pain and fear.

As the priest approached, the man whispered, “I know you. You are an Epke.”, his voice trembling.

The priest nodded and asked, “How did you get here?”, to which the man responded, “I was a captive, I escaped yesterday.” the man said, breathing raggedly.

“The soldiers set up camp in Obutong after the conquest. I was among the captives. They carried with them supplies to make cages, and I was in one of the cages in the camp. The following day after the conquest, I was sitting in the camp, watching them from the cage, two soldiers challenged each other to a wrestling match.” he said, then, he began to cough.

The priest offered the man some water, and from the callouses on the man’s hand, he could tell the man was a fisherman.

“The first of the soldiers took off his armor and his shoes. But after he did, he began to furiously scratch his eye. He scratched really hard and wouldn’t let up.” the man said and then stopped to catch his breath again.

“He scratched until he started bleeding, then, he yelled in agony. He took a piece of wood and began using it to scratch his already bloodied eye, then, when he pulled out his knife and proceeded to start using it, the other soldier tried to intervene, but the first soldier slammed him into the ground. The second soldier stood up and stabbed himself. Then, they both turned their blades on each other.” the man said, then, tears began to fall from his eyes.

“I thought it was divine intervention. Our enemies turning on each other. As the madness and chaos spread, one of the soldiers discovered that it was the soil. Once a soldier touched the ground, he became irritable and began to harm himself. They began to lay clothes on the floor, and that was when they started to torture us. Some of them climbed into the trees to prevent from touching the ground.” he stopped and coughed weakly.

“I managed to escape, but what I did not know was that some of the mad soldiers wandered into the forest as well. Earlier today, I woke up to one of them hacking at my leg. After he did, he abandoned me to bleed out.” the man’s voice grew weaker, and he soon succumbed to his wounds.

The priest bowed his head, whispering a prayer for the man. Suddenly, the sound of twigs breaking in the distance jolted him. He ran back to the raft and began rowing away, his mind racing with fear and guilt. The weight of his failure pressed down on him, and he fought back tears, deeply unsettled by what he had just witnessed. Then it clicked—Abebi.

Realizing that all the villages in the area were likely overrun and the forests unsafe, he knew there was only one place left to go: his cousin Timidi’s refuge. Years ago, as a non-believer, Timidi had been exiled by the priest, but because they were family, the priest had provided a location for him far downstream, past where the stream emptied into the delta. The only marker was a giant Baobab tree.

Okeoghene spent the night on the raft, too afraid to return to the village. By first light, he began sailing towards Timidi's location, but controlling the raft was difficult. He spent most of the day struggling to keep it on course. As the day wore on, he realized with growing frustration that he couldn't find the Baobab tree; it seemed to have disappeared.

He returned to the last familiar point in the journey multiple times, trying to find the correct way. The babies were awake now and hungry. This was their last meal, and he was still lost in the water.

Eventually, he gave up the search and began to feed the babies, giving them small portions each to keep the fingers of hunger at bay. Just as he was about to continue rowing, he noticed the water had calmed, so he let the raft drift slowly across the tranquil waters.

He took the first baby and fed her until she was full, then rocked her to sleep. As he prepared to feed the second baby, he saw it—the giant Baobab tree, just ahead. The reason he hadn't found it earlier was that he hadn't sailed far enough.

He felt a wave of relief upon seeing the tree from afar. The sun was just drifting over the horizon, so he began steering the raft towards the tree. But as he got closer, he saw a bleached skull hanging from a branch and feared the worst. Anxiety gripped him. The second baby began to fuss, about to cry. Quickly, he soothed her with the remaining pap, and after a few minutes, she too fell asleep.

Okeoghene secured the raft and calmly climbed out. He stood at the dock, scanning the area. There were no immediate threats, but this was just the marker. His cousin's refuge lay deeper within the thicket. At the base of the Baobab tree, under where the skull hung, he saw a black pot—a sign to turn back and not enter.

He thought to himself, "If this is how I die, then this is how I die." But then, he looked back at the sleeping babies and closed his eyes. He couldn't be reckless. This was his last hope of finding food for the babies and a boat for safe travel. He remembered the fate of the survivors and murmured, "We can only do what we are sure is right with the time we have left." Irodeyin's words had stuck with him. He noticed it was getting dark. If he wanted to see where he was going, he needed to start now.

He returned to the raft and watched the babies sleeping peacefully. He caressed their faces and whispered, "I will come back for you." Then, he covered the gourds with another layer of cloth, picked up his cutlass, and set out.

As he ventured into the trees, a thousand questions flashed through his mind: Was his cousin dead? Whose skull was it? Had the raiders come here too? He began cutting and pushing through the thicket. His arms ached from rowing, making the effort of pushing through the vines even more grueling.

The moon was starting to shine over the forest, and it was a bright moon, but this was a thick part of the forest, with tangled undergrowth and a

system of interlocking vines above, snaking between trees in competition for light. It was hard to see the forest floor. It was eerily silent, no animals running around, just the rustling of leaves as he moved cautiously.

A gentle breeze blew, and all of a sudden, a swift movement flickered in his peripheral vision, and he panicked, his heart began to thump loudly, but he managed to keep composure. He squatted and began to observe, scared to make any noise. Then, thoughts of being torn apart by a stalking cat—or worse, cannibals, began to flash through his mind. He waited for a moment, but he could not hear anything.

Tentatively, he began to edge towards the place where he had seen the movement. He was relieved to find that it was neither an animal or man, but rather, a small piece of clothe, tied to a nearby tree that had fluttered when the wind blew. He was relieved, but curiosity took over.

The dim light filtering through the branches cast eerie moving shadows, but as he approached, he noticed something strange about the cloth. On it were inscriptions, so, he held the cloth against the light that shined through and recognized them—Nsibidi symbols. He spent a huge portion of his training as a youth learning the secretive writing system with his cousin. The symbols pointed him in a direction, and this brought huge relief, he was on the right track.

He followed the directions woven into the first clothe until he discovered another parchment, and then, a third, each leading him further and further into the thicket. At some point, he got worried about the babies and was

going to turn back, but he had gone so far that it made no sense to return without finding out the state of his cousin's abode.

The third parchment was wrapped around a branch. As he reached out to untangle it, eager to read the instructions, but, a sudden force yanked his wrist. In a disorienting instant, he was hoisted off his feet, caught in a fisherman's net, and dangled upside down.

A distant horn blew, echoing ominously through the trees. Panic set in as he realized it was a trap. Straining to see any signs of his captors, he spotted a figure—a young boy peering at him from behind a bush, his face obscured by a mask. He called out, trying to coax the boy into dialogue, but the child vanished into the shadows as silently as he had appeared.

His heart racing, he scanned his surroundings more frantically. Another figure appeared, then another. They encircled him, and they were all masked. A masked man stepped forward, followed by another boy, and they cut him down from the net. His relief was short-lived as he began to plead with the strange, silent figures converging around him. Their response was a tightening circle.

As he searched their faces for any sign of mercy, a blunt force struck the side of his head. As he hit the floor, everything was plunged into darkness.

## ***The Exiled - Timidi***

The chief priest jolted awake, his senses flooding back in a sharp, unrelenting torrent. The dull throb in his head pulsed rhythmically, each beat a stark reminder of his dire situation. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the silhouette of a cage materialized around him, its bars as unyielding as the grim reality that gripped him. The figures had taken him to a clearing, deep within the heart of the forest, where a small, ragtag community seemed to be taking root amidst the untamed wilderness. Panic seized him—the babies! His mind raced with thoughts of the vulnerable lives depending on his safe return.

Frantically, he examined his enclosure, his eyes searching for any flaw, any space that might serve as his means of escape. Desperation clawed at him—he should never have ventured here. While the figures did not look like Omi soldiers, he wasn't sure that this was any better. It was then that a voice sliced through the quiet of the night, from the thick bushes behind the cage. A familiar timbre that brought relief.

"Timidi, it is a great relief to hear your voice," he called out, his words tinged hope of being released from the cage.

But the response was not immediate. Timidi's silence hung heavy in the air, then, with a tone that seemed to carry the weight of unspoken years, Timidi tried to begin speaking three times, but his words were caught in his throat, but he eventually spoke, saying.

"When we were younger, my mother had a persistent rat problem. After days of their havoc, I set traps throughout our hut. The next morning, I found two rats caught in my snares. I took them outside, and when I did, they looked powerless, and pity overtook me, and instead of killing them, I released them at the edge of the forest. A few days later, my mother's complaints resumed—new rats had arrived to plague us. I reset the traps, yet they caught nothing for days on end. It dawned on me then; the rats had learned from my earlier mistake before I had. When I next visited my mother, I discovered they had bitten her finger as she slept. That fury drove me to hunt down and kill each one with my own hands." he said, raising his hands out of the bush against the beam of the moonlight.

Timidi's story hung between them, a grim parable of unintended consequences and lessons learned the hard way. "Our agreement was clear—you stay away, and I stay away." he said

Emerging from the bush, his figure shadowed and imposing in the moonlight, Timidi's presence was . "What are you doing here? Did you not see the sign to turn back?"

"The skull?" the priest questioned, confusion lacing his voice. "I thought it signaled that someone had harmed you, perhaps even killed you and had taken over living here. I had to check if you were alive."

"Now you care about my well-being?!" Timidi's voice rose, thick with accusation. He began to inch closer and closer, "You exiled me! Kicked me out of the village and left me to fend for myself in this unforgiving

wilderness!" His approach was relentless, closing the distance until he stood face to face with the priest, separated only by the cold, indifferent bars of the cage.

"How dare you come here and feign concern for my safety?"

The accusation struck a raw nerve deep within the priest. "I... I'm... sorry..." The words barely left his quivering lips before he broke down, tears coursing down his cheeks, sobs wracking his body. Witnessing the depth of his despair, Timidi's anger seemed to falter, his advance halting as he took a step back, the intensity of the moment receding as abruptly as it had surged between them.

"You are sorry." Timidi said calmly, then, he laughed. "You are sorry... That's what you have to say?! You put me here!!" he yelled, spit flying out of his mouth, his eyes red.

Timidi's words hung in the air, and for a minute, nobody said anything. At this point, the children had gathered in the corner of the hut hiding, but watching. Then, Timidi began to speak, "We are family, which is why I am less inclined to put your skull next to the last unfortunate soul that tried to come for my children. I need you gone before dawn. If I or any of these children ever see your face again. I swear on my mother, I will put you in the ground." After saying this, he turned around and, his footsteps began to recede into the darkness.

"Everyone is dead!" the priest cried out, desperation lacing his voice as Timidi walked away. Timidi froze mid-stride, his body stiffening. "What did you just say?"

"Everyone in the village is dead. We were raided a few nights ago, and they either killed everyone or took them hostage... In my attempt to help some survivors, we entered into an ambush, and I... I was the only one who made it out. I am here to seek your help. But before that, I need your aid." The priest paused, clearing his eyes of the tears that threatened to spill. "I have babies with me... had... I had babies with me. They are alone in the dark, please. We have to get them before someone finds them."

Timidi fell to his knees, his body crumpling under the weight of the revelation. "My mother...?"

"I'm so sorry," the priest whispered, his voice heavy with shared grief.

"Answer me! Did my mother make it out?" Timidi's plea was raw, desperate.

"You know your mother, she would never let herself become a captive... I laid her to rest after the attack."

Timidi's sobs filled the night air, his anguish palpable. He let out a yell and questioned, "Where were you?! Why didn't you come find me?!!", but the priest could not answer, his throat constricted by a wail. He let it out, and Timidi joined.

The priest waited a moment, allowing the gravity of the moment to settle before speaking again. "I know this is painful news. But for the sake of the children, we need to go."

"The twins?" Timidi answered, perplexed, his grief momentarily overshadowed by confusion.

"So, the gods have a sense of humor. How did you end up fathering twins?"

"How did you know they were twins?"

"Because I am not an idiot. I had to ensure you were the only one. I found them by the shore."

Then, the realization hit Timidi, and accusation crept into his voice. "So, even after all that has happened, you are still out here disposing of innocent children in the forest. Leaving the helpless to the elements, to the monstrosities that reside in the forest."

The chief priest listened, tears glistening in his eyes. "I was not disposing of the babies. I have rounded a corner, and I cannot see the reasons behind some of the actions I took. I do not know where to turn anymore. I have turned to our gods and they have turned me away, and I have turned to foreign gods that I have seen work wonders, but they too have given me no response. I have nowhere else to turn to."

"Have you come here to seek absolution from me?" Timidi's question hung heavy in the air.

The priest hesitated. "No. There's a reason I came here..." He fell silent.

"I made a promise to their mother. I need to take them to their mother's village and hand them over to their own people."

Timidi stared at the priest, speechless.

The priest remained quiet for a while before continuing, recounting the tragic events that had led him to the shores of Timidi's exile.

Timidi turned away, his heart heavy as he contemplated the life he lost due to the priest's tyrannical lust with spirituality and tradition. In his exile, the priest did not even look after his mother, and now, suddenly, the man grew a heart?

Timidi turned back around and began to speak, "Look around, and listen with your ears. The faces you have seen, and the noise you hear in the hut. They belong to the children you abandoned in the forest over the years. You never even came back to see what had happened to those children, did you? Where did you think they went?" Timidi's voice was laced with bitter accusation.

"If you have come here for absolution or aid, I have none for you. For you have forsaken the needy and trampled on the helpless." he finished saying, then, he began to walk away, his footsteps heavy with the weight of his words.

"No, I do not deserve absolution," the priest called out, his voice breaking. "I need your help. I need a boat. So, even if it's the last thing I do, I can make up for some of the things I have done." Tears streamed down his face, his anguish raw and unfiltered. Timidi hesitated for a second, but continued on his path, disappearing into the night.

Left alone with his thoughts, the priest spent the night contemplating his life, wandering along the shallow edge of the pit where he had buried his darkest deeds. He even began to wonder if he had been performing all his duties the right way and the gods were truly there, and Timidi's actions were the reason the gods had not come to their aid. Between Abeni and Timidi, none of the twins sacrificed over the last few years had ever truly been sacrificed. What if this, in conjunction with the many sins of his people, their lack of even basic sacrifices and worship, had led the gods to punish them?

He laid on his back, the moon shining brightly above, and his thoughts drifted back to Abeni, her talk about her twin sister and the moon. He thought of his own childhood, he was a lonely child, the only son to the most powerful medicine man in the region. He had no friends because he scared people.

Then, his mind drifted to the babies. The divine intervention he had witnessed. His mind wandered from the dark regions of his guilt to thoughts of the infants. Were they sleeping? Had they eaten? Where were they sleeping? He hoped, at least, that they were warmer than he was in this moment, alone with the weight of his actions and the uncertainty of his fate.

## ***The Apostate - A Resolution***

Timidi stared at the boiling pot of water in front of him with weary eyes. He had barely gotten any sleep, spending the whole night tossing and turning. He could not believe his mother was dead. At some point during the night, he had gotten up to patrol, worried that the attackers might have followed the priest. Even though he had performed thorough checks earlier, he couldn't shake the unease. During his patrol, he removed the skull from the tree, as now, it signified human presence and could invite unwanted guests, then, he reset the traps that needed resetting.

He was distracted from his thoughts by the sweeping of [?. Boy's name here] when he asked Timidi to raise his legs so he could sweep that area. As he watched the children go about their morning chores, Timidi's mind was consumed with conflicting thoughts.

The priest was now aware of this location and the fact that he had been stealing the twins from the clutches of death, rendering the priest's sacrifices inert. What if the priest had been right all along? What if his actions, stealing those babies, were the reason the gods had stopped listening? Could that be why the village was overrun by raiders?

Whether or not it was, Timidi knew he had to make a decision. He could kill the priest and raise these children by himself, or let the priest go, trusting that nothing would fall back on them. This came with the risk of the children being killed as well. If the priest was captured and tortured, or if he was lying about his sudden 'change', everything Timidi had worked for could be destroyed.

These children were all he had to show for his entire existence. If they were killed, he would be like a snake that crawled over the top of a mountain, leaving no sign of his existence behind. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

Pushing aside his worries for a moment, Timidi put the eldest of the children in charge of watching the pot and went to bring the babies out. He blew a horn whistle to gather the children together and introduced them to the babies. Then, they all made breakfast together, a simple but hearty meal of [?. insert Ijaw breakfast food].

After ensuring the children were settled, Timidi took some of the breakfast, and a stool, then, he returned to the priest's cage. He offered the priest some food, and then sat next to the cage and began to stare into the distance, consumed by his thoughts again. The priest eventually brought him back by clearing his throat really loudly.

Timid broke his gaze with the air and turned to the priest, asking, "Where did you lay my mother to rest?" Timidi asked, his voice steady despite the emotion that threatened to overwhelm him.

The priest met his gaze, and replied. "I laid all of our family that I could find in the same spot, near the well at the edge of the west entrance into the forest. I marked it with a large rock." Then the priest looked back down at his food saying, "You won't be able to miss it."

Timidi nodded, his jaw clenched as he processed the information. The weight of his past and the uncertainty of the future hung heavy on his shoulders, but he knew he had to be strong for the children who depended

on him. He had a decision to make, and he couldn't afford to let his emotions cloud his judgment.

The priest observed Timidi's reaction and then, in an attempt to comfort him, he reached through the bars of the cage and rubbed Timidi's shoulder. At first, Timidi shook and thought he was being attacked, but then, he relaxed. The priest then said, "They are resting in the afterlife, and one day, we will be able to join them in the bosom of the gods."

Timidi sat silently, absorbing the priest's words. The idea of an afterlife, of being reunited with loved ones in the bosom of the gods, seemed like a comforting thought, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it. The cruelty of this life, the suffering he had witnessed and experienced, made it difficult for him to accept the existence of any divine beings.

"If there is an afterlife, that is" Timidi replied, shaking his head. "I don't really believe in the gods. The cruelty of this life is too much to be the handiwork of any divine beings."

The priest nodded, a look of understanding in his eyes. "I understand where you're coming from, Timidi. Even I am not sure what to believe anymore. But there have been signs of the existence of gods, especially since that fateful night."

He paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "Even until now, the forest plays tricks on me. Whispering to me inconsistencies, like two sides with different motives, one commanding me for doing the right work, and the other condemning me for my vicious ways."

The priest's voice grew quieter, more introspective. "And despite all that I have seen, and all my dedication throughout my life to the work of the gods, I stand here questioning the old ways, questioning the laws which I enforced with no remorse."

Timidi couldn't help but scoff. "Or these rules are just bondages, snares and ropes woven by fear and tightened by blind obedience, tightened so hard that even the gods themselves lack the strength to break us free."

He fixed the priest with a penetrating gaze. "You speak of these laws like you were there when they were handed down by the gods. Who is to say that they were not etched by human fear? What if these gods never even existed? What if the powerful men before us made up this gods to control the rest of us? Have you ever considered that?"

The priest met Timidi's eyes, a flicker of something akin to doubt in his expression. "More than you care to know, especially in the last few days. But, you haven't seen what I have seen."

He shifted, leaning closer to the bars of the cage. "Things that make me question my whole life. The question of whether or not gods exist is no question at all. For I have witnessed divine intervention. But rather than bolster my faith, all it has done is made me question who I have served."

Timidi remained silent, pondering the priest's words. The idea of divine intervention, of gods meddling in the affairs of men, was both intriguing and unsettling. But even if the gods did exist, what kind of gods would demand such cruelty, such blind obedience? The thought made his stomach churn, and he found himself questioning everything he had ever believed.

The priest's eyes widened at Timidi's accusation. "Have I served myself on a misguided path?" the priest wondered aloud, his voice trembling slightly. "Inheriting the fears of my ancestors, blindly following the path laid out for me... No, it couldn't be." he said, shaking his head.

Timidi's eyes narrowed, his disappointment evident. "Despite all that has happened, somewhere in your heart, you still cling to your old ways."

Timidi's voice rose with each word, his hands clenched tightly. "Look around you! Look at these children, cast out by you into the judgeful hands of the unforgiving elements. It was I who saved them from death's cold grasp, not your gods! I did!!" Timidi banged against the bars of the cage, his frustration palpable.

The priest leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with a mix of awe and uncertainty. "Abesi's prayers, Timidi... I witnessed them firsthand. The way her babies were brought back, their scars and shimmering eyes... It defies natural explanation."

"Not only did the gods spare them, they brought those children back to life," he insisted.

Timidi, skeptical, didn't believe a word of it. The priest urged him to go check on the babies, describing a scar across one baby's chest that extended through her back, and the other's eyes, which had a grey shimmer like light fish scales.

Reluctantly, Timidi acquiesced and went to check on the babies. When he returned moments later, astonishment was written all over his face. The babies were not even old enough for such a scar to have healed.

Timidi's brow furrowed, his lips pressed into a thin line. He paced back and forth, the tension in his shoulders betraying his inner turmoil. Then, he began to speak.

Timidi, still suspicious, asked, "So, you spent your whole life being a..." He struggled to find the right word to describe the priest. "...being you. Martyring babies for your own safety. And all of a sudden, you gloriously and miraculously transform into whatever it is that you are now. I find it extremely hard to believe."

The priest nodded, "I keep thinking the same."

"Good for you," Timidi scoffed, "but what in the name of the gods does that have to do with me?"

The priest explained, "Like I said last night, I need a boat. The one part I failed to mention was that before their mother died, she promised to haunt me through the ends of the earth if her babies died without returning to their home."

"Good," Timidi said coldly. "You deserve it."

"Yes, I do. And if worse could happen, it would not be far-fetched," the priest agreed.

Timidi shook his head. "These children do not deserve to go with you. I cannot give them to you in good conscience."

The priest started to speak, "You are also right to believe that, cousin. If past experiences are anything to go by, I have shown you no reason..."

Timidi cut him off, irritation evident in his voice. "Why do you keep agreeing with everything I'm saying? I find it very irritating."

The priest apologized, "I apologize, cousin," the priest said softly. "I do not mean to merely agree with you. Our perspectives have aligned on many issues, but the matter of the gods remains a point of contention."

Timidi scoffed, rolling his eyes. "And what of the children's survival? Have you considered it may have angered the very gods you speak of?"

He stopped pacing and then got closer to the cage again. His eyes bore into the priest, his voice low and measured.

"Why should I trust that you won't change your mind during the journey?" He pointed back at the house, "That you won't sacrifice us all if presented with evidence supporting your beliefs?"

The air between them grew heavy with unspoken fears and doubts, the weight of their shared history pressing down upon them. Timidi waited for the priest's response, his eyes narrowed and his hands clenched at his sides.

The priest fell quiet, his gaze turning inward as he contemplated Timidi's words. After a long moment, he spoke.

"Redemption is not a journey taken in the light," he said, his eyes meeting Timidi's. "It is a journey taken through the night, a test of one's ability to forge ahead with hope through the dark, and hold onto the warmth through the cold of one's doubts."

The priest's hands gripped the bars of the cage, his knuckles turning white. "I am walking a path of redemption, Timidi. I make a solemn promise to you, here and now, that no harm will come to you or your children. There's no longer a village for me to cower behind, no excuse to proclaim that my actions are for their protection."

Timidi's lips curled into a bitter smile, a harsh laugh escaping his throat. "Or perhaps, I should put your skull next to the one at the entrance." He then gestured towards the beach, "No, no... it might look better on the small beach on the other side, facing the sea. A warning to others who would follow in your footsteps."

The priest's shoulders sagged, his head bowing in acceptance. "If death is what comes to me, then I deserve it," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Timidi shook his head, a look of disgust crossing his face. He spat on the ground, the sound harsh and final.

Without another word, Timidi turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing against the hard-packed earth. He paused at the door to the house, his hand resting on the rough wood. With a decisive motion, he pulled the door closed, the sound of a heavy bolt sliding into place echoed through the quiet clearing.

The priest watched Timidi go, a mix of despair and resignation settling into his bones. The conversation was over, and despite his pleas and promises, he had failed to convince Timidi to let him go. The weight of his past sins pressed down upon him, a suffocating darkness that threatened to engulf him whole.

The sun climbed higher in the sky, its warm rays filtering through the dense canopy of leaves above. The priest sat in his cage, his mind racing with thoughts of redemption, forgiveness, and the long road ahead.

### **Vignette - Absolute Rules**

*// The chief priest put his faith in the laws and rules of the societies he lived in, a slave to rules. But the reality of the world is that there are no absolute rules, not even in the cosmos, the rules that governed the universe at its inception defer from the rules that govern it today, and as the universe fades into the hands of oblivion, a brother of mine, we shall watch the laws of the universe fade into his right hand. Any rules declared as absolute are that way because you have said that they are.*

*If there are no absolute rules in the cosmos, how much so in human societies, the absolute truths of the chief priest's yesterday are an absolute lie today. Yet, men like him trade these falsehoods for a new set of untruths, unable to come to terms with a world devoid of absolute rules, they crumble without someone to tell them what to do.*

## Chapter 7: Rebuilding

### *Prophets and Ghosts of the past - Ifatoyin*

Abebi stepped out to get some fresh air, it was one of the only times she had stepped out of the house since the funeral. She was an Opo (grieving widow) and it was customary for her to stay indoors for at least 40 days. She had not seen the outside of the hut in over 5 weeks and outside of compound in over three months. [.? Confirm details of the custom.]

[.? Post funeral, add Arole, the rethatching of the roof for succession to Abebi, as he had no other surviving male family member.]

She was relieved that Morenike and Bose were here today. The babies had woken her up in the early hours of the morning, and refused to go back to sleep until after sunrise. Bose and Morenike had showed up at the compound to assist her with taking care of the babies. They played a game of ayò olópón inside the hut and encouraged Abebi to go outside.

Abebi looked around the compound, the floors were neatly swept with circular patterns left in the sand. She stepped into the sand with her bare left foot and left a print in the pattern. This felt good, and she curled her toes, enclosing some of the sand between her toes and sole, then, she did the same with her right foot.

She looked up at the roofs, and the Bere grass used to thatch the roofs had changed hues since she last saw them. She loved the serenity and the quiet in the compound today. As a chief, Ajanaku had a small market situated in

front of the compound, but since his death, the market had been closed and temporarily resituated by Iyalode.

As Abebi observed the compound, she caught a glimpse of Ajanaku's hut; she hadn't been able to summon the courage to go in there since his funeral. She felt an urge to go there, hoping she would find him sitting inside, but she could not get herself to go.

Instead, she walked towards the compound exit. Outside the compound, she observed that the town was mostly now back to normal. The village had gotten good at coming together to rebuild. 25 years of on and off raids by other kingdoms had taught them to make and store extra clay for blocks, Bere for thatched roofs and wood in reserve.

Baba Boyega, Abebi's adjacent neighbor, had his two sons outside, they were working on a small fence that formed an animal enclosure around the side of their compound. Abebi observed for a bit and had just begun to walk back into the compound when she was approached by a youth guard bringing a message from the town square area.

The guard in front, Yelè, wore a loose-fitting brown tunic that draped over his shoulders, paired with matching trousers. A similarly dressed deputy followed closely behind.

"E nle nbe o. E ku ewu omo." (Hello there, ma'am. Salutations on enduring the pains of childbirth.)

Abebi turned to face the guard. He bowed respectfully, and as he raised his head, tribal marks were revealed on his cheeks – three short slashes on

each, aged and etched into his skin. The other guard, Yele's deputy also bowed, but he never spoke.

He held a short staff on his right hand, and hung it under his armpit as he spoke, "I know you are still in mourning, but there is an urgent matter that requires your attention." The guard said, then, he bowed again, then, he continued to speak, "There is an old man waiting for you at the central square."

Abebi was taken aback by the sudden arrival of the guard and his strange request. "Which old man?" she replied.

"I do not know his name. I have never seen him around here before, which prompted me to confront him, but he refused to give me a name." the guard said.

This perplexed Abebi, so, she inquired for him to tell her more about this strange man. She also offered the guard a seat on the small wooden bench nearby, but the soldier refused the seat. The soldier then began to speak, "I suspected that he might be a spy from the Omi kingdom, but they do not share our culture, and this old man was dressed like one of us."

"I became very suspicious and was going to arrest him, but when I confronted him, he said 'I do not want any trouble, I'm simply awaiting Abebi'". The soldier said, pointing to Abebi.

“So, I watched him till the end of my shift. When I left, I stationed two guards to watch him until he left.”

“But imagine my surprise when I returned this morning to find that he hadn’t left that spot since the moment I left. I asked all of my comrades if they recognized him, and no one seems to know this man.” the guard said in frustration.

“If it is possible for you come, please, come and verify that you know this man, or I will be forced to bring him before the king as an invader.” Yelè said, pointing in the vicinity of the village square. “I have a team of guards/soldiers observing him, ready to take him in, if you do not recognize him.”

“An old man you’ve never seen before... that nobody know...” Abebi said, her eyes wandering off, as she began to think of who this old man might be. She had known Yele since he was a boy, and could not think of any old man still alive that the guard would not recognize. Certainly not any that would behave so strangely.

“Give me a moment”, she said to the guard, and disappeared into the compound.

Inside the hut, the babies were still sleeping, and Bose is losing the match. “Tell Bose to learn how to respect her elders.” Morenike said smugly, smiling at Abebi. She smiled back and observed the wooden plaque the game was being played on.

“Ahh You don’t even stand a chance.” Abebi said, rubbing Bose’s head.

“E fimile jere!” (You people should leave me alone!) Bose said, staring intently at the board.

Abebi walked up to the babies and caressed their cheeks, then, without turning around, she began to speak, “I am needed at the town square.” Abebi informed the duo. “There is someone waiting there for me.” Abebi said, then, she took off her wrapper and began wearing a blouse.

“Who?” Bose asked inquisitively.

Abebi stopped changing her clothes and replied, “I don’t know. Nobody seems to know.”

This intrigued Morenike who looked up from the board at Abebi. “What do you mean no one knows?” she questioned.

“None of the guards recognize him.” she replied, “The guard said the man has been waiting since last night.”, he wants me to come see who it is, if I don’t recognize him, they will take him to the king.” she said, looking down at the babies as they slept.

Morenike stood up slowly from the bench and replied, “Uhm. Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to go out there to meet this strange man? You have

just finished your mourning period.” She said, trying to observe Abebi’s face for a reaction, but there was none.

“In light of recent events, the guards should detain first and ask questions later.” She continued as she walked over to Abebi’s side. “What if it’s a spy? Or assassin?” Bose followed.

Abebi stopped for a second and thought about what Morenike and Bose were saying. While it made sense, something tugged at her—there had to be more to the story than that. An assassin is more likely to target the king, not a grieving widow.

“An assassin would not sit in the middle of the village. That would be strange... to say the very least.”, she said, then turned to both Morenike and Bose, “I am going with Yelè, he is trustworthy... besides, I’m a good fighter, I can hold my own, if push come to shove.”, then she smiled reassuringly.

“Please watch over the children. I will return soon.” she said as she exited the house.

“One of you has to stay behind to watch the house I am not leaving my children unprotected.” she said to Yelè.

Yelè turned to his deputy and nodded. His deputy nodded back and then nodded at Abebi, and immediately assumed a post by the door of the house.

Morenike and Bose stood and watched as Abebi left with Yelè. They made their way to the square. They walked past various compounds, each a dominion of a family. Some families were limited to small huts, but bigger families lived in clusters of huts, that formed a compound. And for the wealthier families, they had buildings so large it would be a misnomer to call them huts.

As they approached the square, Abebi sighted the figure from afar, she could not make out the face, but she immediately recognized the figure. It looked like Ifatoye.

‘My eyes must be deceiving me’ she thought to herself, her pace slowed to a halt.

The soldier observed and promptly stopped as well, “Is everything okay?” he asked, concerned.

“Yes,” she said, regaining her composure. “I think I know who this is.” she continued, “Is it okay if I walk the rest of the way alone?” she asked.

“Absolutely not.” the guard replied. “You have children at home, and I am not ready to assume any responsibilities; be it for children, or for your life.”

Abebi laughed, “You can keep watch, I would just like some privacy when I speak with him.” she said. Yelè stayed back as Abebi continued walking forward. The square was clear, it was as though the remaining guards had prevented anyone from coming into the square.

Abebi slowly approached the figure, and sure enough, the closer she got, the more certain she was of the person's identity. It was certainly Ifatoye. She was perplexed. As a child, she had been told that he had died.

They locked eyes as she got closer. Ifatoyin had barely aged, even though it had been over a decade. She was a kid when he disappeared and was never heard from again. She stopped a few meters away and tried to speak, but she could not come up with anything to say. What do you say to a ghost of the past?

Ifatoye sat there, staring into Abebi's eyes, and after a few moments, she broke eye contact and knelt before him. She stuck her gaze into the sand in front of her, and greeted him in the traditional greeting for the Babalawo (Chief priest/Native doctor).

"Aboru Aboye Abosise" (we will make the offering, and it will be accepted, we will survive, and it will be successful) she said, it was a proper greeting to a Babalawo that one was familiar with, but she had nothing else to say.

"Ó ti tó ọdún mélòó tí a rí ùbọ kẹyìn, báwo la ṣe mọ́ wípé ó máa yẹ, pé ó máa ṣiṣẹ?"(How many years has it been since we made sacrifices/rituals, how would you know that it would be successful, that we will survive?) Ifatoyin finally spoke. His voice had not changed either.

"Where have you been since all these years?" she questioned. "...through the suffering, the pain." she paused, "Are you even real? You are supposed to be dead." she said, her voice breaking.

“Come closer” he beckoned, stretching his hands out. Abebi took her eyes off the sand, and stood. She cautiously approached him. When she got close enough, he pulled the sleeves of his top, revealing his arms to Abebi. He then asked her to touch his arm.

“You possess the warmth of the living,” she said, her eyebrows furrowed. “What happened?” she questioned. “My dream...” she continued, “My sister, she was exiled...”

He closed his eyes and smiled, then, he began, “It is not yet time for us to discuss, the time will come soon.” He suddenly pulled her closer to himself, and then whispered in her ears, “When the time comes, you will know... You will know where to find me.”

The guards, upon observing this, began to charge towards them. “Ìgbà yẹn la máa ṣe àyèwò àwọn ìbejì wọnýí” (That is when we will examine the future of these twins), he said in a louder voice.

Perplexed at the fact that he knew she had twins, she questioned “Aha, bawo le se mo?” (aha, how did you know?), but rather than get a response, Ifatoyin shouted “Egbé”, a bright light and a concussive blast hit everyone in the vicinity, throwing Abebi down to the ground. When she opened her eyes, Ifatoyin had disappeared. She checked herself, and despite being thrown a few feet from where she had been standing, she was unharmed.

‘Egbe’ she muttered to herself.

“Are you okay?” Yelè inquired, looking over Abebi to see if she was harmed. “I should have arrested that miserable old man!” he yelled, incensed.

“You couldn’t have arrested him... you never stood a better chance catching him than you did capturing the wind itself.” Abebi said, as Yelè helped her up. “He did not harm me... he just had a message to deliver.” she continued.

She then held him by the shoulders and said “Thank you!”, then, she began to return to her hut.

“Let me walk you back to your hut” he said, following behind Abebi.  
“That would not be necessary,” Abebi replied.

“It was not a request,” Yelè countered, “I was the one that convinced you to leave your hut, it is my duty to ensure you make it back safely... please.” he said.

Abebi reluctantly acquiesced, and Yelè walked her back to her hut. When she arrived, Morenike and Bose were waiting outside with the babies in their arms. The guard that had been stationed at Abebi’s hut stood stoically behind them. Morenike let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Abebi on her way back to the hut.

“What a strange morning” Bose remarked, Morenike looked at her and nodded in agreement. “She hasn’t left the hut in many days, and all of a

sudden goes to see a strange man in the middle of the village,” Morenike added.

“Are they awake?” Abebi asked when she got closer, Bose and Morenike shook their heads to signify ‘no’, and Abebi sighed.

She looked at Bose, then looked at Morenike, who hadn’t said a word, but her face teemed with questions. Abebi volunteered to answer the most burning question of all before it burst out of their mouths. “It was Fatoyin.” she said. Bose looked confused, she had never heard the name before.

“Fatoyin??” Morenike asked, puzzled, then, realization washed over her face. “But he died?!” she commented with concern, “Years and years ago.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Abebi replied. “He left the village on pilgrimage and never returned,” she added. “It was so strange seeing him in person.” she said as she took her seat. “I wasn’t the only one that saw him”, she said, looking at Yelè. Morenike, Bose, and the deputy looked at Yelè for confirmation. He nodded in agreement, many people had seen the old man.

“Then, he disappeared all of a sudden.” she added, her brows furrowed in confusion. The trio then looked up at Yelè again, he again nodded in confirmation.

Morenike quickly sat down beside Abebi, “What did he say?” she inquired.

“Nothing meaningful”, Abebi lied. “I could not make sense of anything he said”, she continued.

“Uhm, what do you mean he disappeared??” Bose interjected.

“I think it was Offe. It means to become one with the wind. But I could have sworn I heard him say ‘Egbe’ instead.” Abebi responded, then she turned to Yele and said, “Thank you.” The guards said nothing, nodded and went on his way. The three ladies entered the hut where Abebi contemplated Ifatoyin’s words.

Over the next few days, there were multiple sightings of an old man, by men and women, young and old, farmers and blacksmiths. Even the king had caught a glimpse of Ifatoyin while he walked through the palace grounds, from his peripheral view, he spotted Ifatoye watching him from afar, but when he looked, the man was gone.

## ***The Regent***

### [CHAPTER CHANGES]

- Ige earns the title of Esho, and is to go through a ceremony around the same time as Abebi where he is handed an Alakoro (coronet) and a batton of office for his bravery.
- Opo discussion.

Olugbade awoke to the 3rd crow of the cock that morning. Before he went to bed the previous night, he had prayed to Oya to hold back the storms, and to his pleasant surprise, it was not raining. His youngest wife laid next to him, her arm across his chest. He gently took her arm off and rolled off the mat. He stepped out of the house and looked to the sky, and fortunately, the sky was clear. He returned inside with a big grin on his face, woke his wife up and sent her back to her hut, then, he began to prepare for the day.

It was his big day, and he had truly prepared for it. When an honourable man is to be bestowed with power and honour, he has to rise up to the occasion, not just in his actions, but in his appearance and in how he carries himself, and Olugbade was the king of ostentatious display.

He spent a long time preparing alongside his aides. On his way out the door, he took a quick swig from a gourd of palmwine—a little liquid courage never did any harm. He came out of the house looking splendid indeed. He was dressed in his finest ofi, an agbada to booth, his neck was adorned with his most precious beads, with gold pieces inlaid with the rest of the iyun (red beads). Outside the hedgerows that surrounded the compound, two drummers and two beautiful lady singers lay in waiting.

Olugbade was a tall man with fair skin, he was muscular and tall, slightly shorter than Ajanaku, but he rivaled Ajanaku in strength, even beating Ajanaku in 3 out of 5 total gidigbo (wrestling matches) in their younger years. He was always of the opinion that Ajanaku robbed him of the position of Balogun, for he was the fiercest soldier the city had in his prime.

As soon as they saw him, they began to drum. And as he exited the compound, they began to walk alongside him, their rhythmic beats announcing his presence, while two beautiful ladies sang his oriki, praising his lineage and accomplishments.

Olugbade danced a little before getting on his horse and riding slowly. He exuded an aura of reverence. On his way to the court, the king spotted him from the palace and shook his head, muttering an old aphorism, "The peacock that spreads its wings too wide will soon have them plucked by the hunter."

He was visibly happy, his joy radiating from him like the sun's rays. As he met some of the chiefs and members of the king's court arriving at the court, some jubilated with him, excited by his grand display, while others saw it as nonsense and ignored it, focusing instead on the matters at hand.

As he approached the interior of the court, Olugbade waved his irukere, (the horsetail flywhisk, a tool for blessing people), the drummers stopped their beat, and he got down from his horse and gave them some money, bidding them farewell. He then entered the court, ready for his new role, a promotion above even some of the other esteemed members of the king's

council. As he entered the courtyard, he began to interact with a few people, his smile broad and his demeanor confident.

After everyone had settled, the Kabiyesi entered into the chambers, and he commanded another level of power and respect that put Olugbade's displays to shame. Before anyone could see the king, a man nicknamed Olohunoyin (the man with the voice of honey), played a short note on his flute and began reciting the king's entrance. The whole court grew silent, and everyone rose to their feet. But no one knew where the king was. Anyone new to the court would have thought they were announcing the entrance of a ghost.

A few moments later, the king appeared, and as he did, everyone bowed and recited in unison, "Kabiyesi ooo" (a title for the king meaning, the entity no one questions). He waved his Opa ase, and everyone sat down in unison. The King had not been seen by anyone since the initial debriefing after the Battle of Broken Spears.

Oba [KING's name here ?.] had been on the throne since he was 27 years of age, and had been on the throne for over 15 years, and in the past 10 years, no one had seen the king's face. There were rumors that he had contracted a disease that disfigured his face, some said it was leprosy, some said he lost one of his eyes, but no one knew for sure, and the king always wore a crown of beads and cowries that completely covered his face when in public. When in private, the king would sit in a small chamber with a blind of beads covering the doorway, so, you could only see his silhouette in the darkness of the chamber as she spoke.

After the king took his seat, the court announcer began, his voice resonating through the chamber like a drum, "Esteemed chiefs and noble councilors, hear ye, hear ye! The matters before us this day are threefold: A humble plea from our toiling farmers, the weighty election of a new Balogun, and a matter of discipline that demands our attention."

The first matter at hand was a minor affair concerning a request for supplies by the people. During the Battle of Broken Spears, a few farms had been destroyed, and despite the farmers' best efforts to regrow their crops, the plants had failed to thrive. The Baale ushered them in before the king, and they knelt, pleading for a supply of seeds to make up for the lost harvest.

The king listened intently to their plight, and after a moment of consideration, he approved their request. He ordered that grains be taken from his own stash to recoup all the farmers who came knocking in the next 7 days, no questions asked. The farmers bowed deeply, expressing their gratitude for the king's generosity.

With that matter settled, the court prepared to discuss the next item on the agenda: ascension. However, before they could begin, the king interjected. The court immediately fell silent.

"Before we proceed," the king said, his words measured and deliberate, "there is a matter I wish to address." He paused, allowing the tension to build, then recited an old proverb:

"The river that forgets its source... will surely run dry. And the tree that forgets its roots..." he stopped and pointed his Opa ase at the court.

The court completed the idiom in unison, their voices a mix of reverence and unease, "...will surely wither."

The court fell silent, pondering the meaning behind the king's words. He continued, "Odu Ogbe-Ate tells us that betrayal can come from those we trust the most. It is the duty of the wise to be vigilant and to protect the kingdom from threats, both external and internal."

The king's words hung heavy in the air, and a sense of unease crept through the court. It was clear that the king had something weighing on his mind, and everyone waited with bated breath to hear what he would say next. The king's gaze, hidden behind his veil of beads, seemed to pierce through each and every one of them, as if searching for the truth in their hearts.

"Olugbade, step forward," the king commanded, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. Olugbade, who was a little less gleeful than he was earlier that day, but nonetheless still full of pride, arose from his seat and stood before the court. He squared his shoulders, a hint of defiance in his stance.

The true power of the King's veil lies not just in the mystery of his face, but in the absence of expression. A big part of human communication is in our facial expressions. Behind the veil of beads, the King's gaze always seemed to pierce through each and every one of them. They had to rely on words, often not his direct words to gauge how he was reactions, his mood, his countenance.

When he spoke, his voice was low, almost contemplative.

"Olugbade," the king said, letting the name hang in the air for a moment.

"You've always been one to appreciate our traditions, have you not?"

Olugbade straightened, a flicker of confusion crossing his face before he nodded. "Of course, Your Highness. Our traditions are the backbone of our society."

"Indeed," the king mused. "And among these traditions, how do we typically honor our fallen warriors?"

The court grew still, the tension palpable as Olugbade considered his response. "We mourn them, Your Highness. We celebrate their valor and remember their sacrifices."

The king nodded slowly. "Celebration," he repeated. "An interesting choice of words, Olugbade. Enlighten the court, how did you choose to... celebrate Ajanaku's valor?"

A murmur rippled through the court. Olugbade's eyes darted around, sensing the shift in atmosphere. "I joined in the communal mourning, Your Highness. As was proper."

"Proper," the king echoed. "Yes, propriety is important. Almost as important as loyalty." He paused, letting the word hang heavily in the air. "It's curious, then, that some saw fit to celebrate... differently."

The king's words seemed to drop into the court like stones into a still pond, sending ripples of unease through the gathered chiefs. Olugbade's face remained impassive, but a bead of sweat formed on his brow.

"Your Highness," Olugbade began, his voice carefully controlled, "if there have been any misunderstandings—"

The king raised a hand, silencing him. "Misunderstandings can be dangerous things, Olugbade. They can lead to... suspicions. And suspicions, left unchecked, can fester."

The court held still, unspoken speculations hanging heavy in the air. The king continued, his voice deceptively mild. "It's the duty of a court, and by extension as the Kabiyesi to address such... misunderstandings. To seek clarity. And in seeking this clarity, one must sometimes look in unexpected places."

He gestured towards Iyalode, who sat quietly, her face a mask of serenity. "Our esteemed Iyalode, for instance, has a particular talent for... clarifying matters."

The tension in the room ratcheted up another notch. Eyes darted between the king, Olugbade, and Iyalode, as the implications of the king's words sank in.

Ashipa, known for his loyalty to Olugbade, cleared his throat. "Your Highness, if I may..." he ventured, his voice tinged with nervousness, "Your majesty is most sovereign, and you are our father, and sometimes, the words of the elders are filled with proverbs and aphorisms. Can you shed some light into what you mean?" he cleared his throat, "We... we all know

Iyalode has many talents, but we also know some of those... talents... should be left to be applied to matters of trade and commerce." He had misread the room, hoping for some support from the other chiefs, but got none.

The king's hidden gaze seemed to bore into Ashipa, the silence stretching uncomfortably. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and dangerous. "Ah, Ashipa. Always so eager to understand. Very well, let me illuminate you."

He leaned forward on the throne, his presence looming over the court. "Sasa l'eni naa ti o ti wuwa abosi ati ilara laarin gbogboyin leyin enikeji re l'oju mii," he intoned, his words falling like heavy stones. The court collectively held its breath as the king's words sank in: There is barely any of you that has not been envious and deceptive to another person present here today.

His voice sharpened as he continued, "Perhaps, you would like me to start clarifying what you have said to me about each other... starting with you, Ashipa, you disrespectful goat."

Ashipa's face drained of color. He prostrated himself, words tumbling out in a rush. "Kabiyesi, e ma binu! Forgive me, Your Highness, I meant no disrespect!"

His panicked apology sparked a chorus of contrition from the other chiefs, each eager to distance themselves from Ashipa's misstep. The cacophony of voices rose until the king's voice cut through like a whip crack.

"Silence!" he thundered, his voice echoing off the walls. "You will not tell me how to run my kingdom!"

A ripple of murmured agreement passed through some of the chiefs.

"And who are we," the Odofin asked, "to dictate where talent should be applied? Or how a king should seek his clarity?" the other members of court agreed promptly.

"Very well then" The Kabiyesi said, the silence that followed was absolute. Even the rustle of robes seemed muted, as if the very air was holding its breath.

The king's hidden gaze swept across the room, each chief shrinking under its weight. Finally, his attention returned to Olugbade, who stood rigid, a drop of sweat falling to the follow from his brow.

The king's voice, when it came again, was edged with steel. "Perhaps, instead of questioning the sources of clarity, we should question why such clarity was needed in the first place?"

He leaned forward slightly, the beads of his veil clinking softly. "Or perhaps you would prefer I start enumerating the myriad ways in which ambition has led to... misunderstandings... among this very council?"

The threat, veiled though it was, hung in the air like a storm cloud.

Olugbade, his face now ashen, opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out, but he quickly regained his composure. "Your highness, I was mourning the loss of our Balogun the way I knew."

"Is that so?" he said sarcastically. "Speaking of the Balogun," the king continued, his voice was deceptively calm now, a stark contrast to his previous outburst, "...we need to appoint someone trustworthy. Do you consider yourself trustworthy, Olugbade?"

The question hung in the air like a sword suspended by a thread. All eyes in the court turned to Olugbade, the tension palpable. Olugbade stood frozen, acutely aware of the trap laid before him. He took a deep breath, his mind racing to find a path through this dangerous terrain.

When he spoke, his voice was steady, laden with carefully chosen words. "Everything I do, I do in the interest of the kingdom. This is my only home, the cradle of my family's legacy." He paused, meeting the king's veiled gaze. "If I am untrustworthy in my duties to this kingdom, I am untrustworthy anywhere and my lineage should end with me."

A murmur rippled through the court at Olugbade's bold declaration. The king tilted his head, considering. "Strong words, Olugbade. But actions speak louder than words, do they not?" He gestured broadly to the court. "And it seems some actions have been speaking quite loudly of late."

The king is satisfied with this answer and says, "Very well said, the same is expected of every other chief on this council. Our alliances should lie nowhere else but at home."

Then, he asks the next question. "For whoever is to be given this role, which other qualities should we look out for?"

Olugbade, sensing an opportunity to salvage his position, spoke carefully. "Your Highness, if I may," he began, his voice steady despite the tension. "A Balogun must possess not just physical strength, but strength of character. He must have the experience to lead our warriors, the courage to face our enemies, and the wisdom to know when to fight and when to seek peace."

He paused, meeting the king's veiled gaze. "As for the... misunderstanding about the gathering after Ajanaku's funeral, I assure you, it was not jubilation at his passing, but a solemn tribute to his bravery. We, the children of hunters, have our ways of honoring the fallen."

Olugbade's words were met with a mix of murmurs – some supportive, others skeptical. The king remained silent, his hidden expression unreadable.

Sensing the need to address the earlier accusations directly, Olugbade continued, his voice lowering. "Your Highness, I acknowledge that my actions may have been misinterpreted. But I implore you to consider the source of these accusations. Should the words of unseen spies carry more weight than those of a chief who has served this kingdom faithfully for years?"

The king did not respond, he barely moved as he considered Olugbade's words. After a moment of heavy silence, without responding to Olugbade, he turned his attention to the rest of the court. "And what say the rest of you? What qualities must our Balogun possess?"

The chiefs exchanged glances before offering their answers. "Bravery, Your Highness, never backing down even in the face of great odds" one ventured. "Unmatched strength, like the one exuded by Olugbade" one of his cronies, the Osi added. "Unwavering loyalty, like the hunter's dog, but that loyalty directed at the throne, at one's nation." Odofin retorted.

The king's silence spoke volumes. Dissatisfied, he then followed up, "Are these not qualities that are already found in our people? In our army? In this council?" rising slowly from the throne, the members of the court reset decorum as he rose.

"So... why, with all these qualities, did we fail to prevent the last attack on our village?"

The court fell silent, the chiefs' earlier confidence evaporating like morning mist. No one dared to admit failure. "Olugbade—Inoki onigbongbo, warrior brave and strong, you were on that battlefield, so were many of you and your sons. How did we let them reach the village and attack civilians?"

After a moment that stretched like eternity, the king spoke again. "I seem to recall a strategy involving the mountains. Who proposed this idea?"

Iyalode, who had yet to speak so far, finally spoke up, "If memory serves, Your Highness, Abebi brought that up last year with sponsorship from Ajanaku as the Balogun."

All eyes turned to Abebi, who sat quietly at the edge of the gathering. The king's hidden gaze seemed to bore into her.

"And why did we not implement it again?" he further questioned, but got no response.

"Abebi, enlighten us. What was this strategy?"

Abebi who had not prepared to speak that day was slightly flustered, she had frankly mostly been paying half of her attention to the court, the rest resided with her children.

She gathered herself, rose, her posture straight and with full composure began to speak. "Your Highness," she began, "our strength lies not just in the number and strength of our warriors, but in the wisdom of our strategy. The mountains are not mere rocks; they are our silent guardians, our natural fortress. We stand the best chance mounting defense from the mountains. That's where we're most advantaged to fight back any invading force."

Before she could continue, Olugbade interjected, his voice dripping with disdain. "The people should not be scurrying under the rocks like rats, Your Highness."

Otúnba, a quiet man known for his wisdom rather than his ambition, countered swiftly. "Actually, the deadliest animals hide under rocks, like snakes and scorpions... and their stings and bites are usually the most lethal too."

Olugbade's face reddened, but before he could retort, other chiefs joined the discussion.

Odofin shook his head. "Regardless of our soldiers' strength, they struggled against the small force from Omi kingdom. Numbers alone do not ensure victory."

Àṣíwájú nodded in agreement. "Indeed. When our forces began to falter, the enemy resorted to raiding houses and slaughtering civilians. No amount of brute force could have countered such cunning brutality."

"It was a battle of attrition," Baale added grimly. "And should Omi return, they'll come with an even larger force. Even doubling our army might not be enough." as each chief spoke murmurs grew.

The king raised a hand, silencing the court. He turned back to Abebi. "You speak of advantages, but how would you prevent future attacks? Be specific."

She bowed, then, she continued to speak, "The spider's size and strength is of great importance, but it's greatest advantage in hunting and defense is its spider's web. When positioned correctly, is capable of ensnaring prey many times its size. Our mountain strategy is much the same."

// *Anansi*: This is my favorite part... cause you know... spider-god here.

Abebi's hands moved as she spoke, gesticulating, "We establish a network of lookout points along the ridges, connected by hidden paths known only to our people. These become the threads of our web. From these vantage points, we can spot enemies long before they reach our village, giving us time to prepare or evacuate if necessary."

Her voice grew more animated as she delved into the details. "But the true beauty of this strategy lies in its versatility. When enemies approach, they face an impossible choice. If they split their forces to attack multiple points, they become vulnerable to our coordinated defense. If they concentrate their attack, we can outmaneuver them using our knowledge of the terrain."

Abebi's eyes glinted as she delivered her masterstroke. "And let us not forget the power of perception, Your Highness. To our enemies, every shadow on the mountainside becomes a potential ambush, every rustle in the undergrowth a hidden warrior. We can make our force seem twice, thrice its actual size through clever positioning and well-timed movements."

The court buzzed with a mix of impressed murmurs and skeptical whispers. The king, however, seemed unmoved. "An interesting strategy," he said, his tone unreadable. "But tell me, Abebi, how would this work with our limited resources? We are not a wealthy kingdom."

Abebi didn't miss a beat. Her lips curved into a small, confident smile. "Your Highness, our greatest wealth lies not in gold or weapons, but in the ingenuity of our people and the bounty of our land."

She stepped forward, her voice taking on a teacher's patient tone. "Consider the humble pebble, Your Highness. Insignificant when held in the hand, yet devastating when rolled down a mountainside in the hundreds. Every stream bed becomes an armory, every steep slope a potential avalanche."

Abebi's gaze swept the room, including each chief in her vision. "We train not just warriors, but every able-bodied villager in the art of mountain warfare. The farmer's hoe becomes a tool for digging hidden traps. The hunter's snares, when scaled up, can entangle entire enemy squadrons."

Her voice dropped to a near whisper, forcing the court to lean in. "And we use the mountain itself as our ally. We create false trails leading to dead ends or ambush points. We craft hidden observation posts within the very rocks, allowing our scouts to remain unseen and unheard."

Abebi's tone became passionate, almost reverent. "But our true resource, Your Highness, is knowledge. Knowledge of every path, every cave, every spring in our domain. This is wealth no enemy can steal, no spy can fully uncover. We turn our entire territory into a labyrinth where we are the only ones who know the way."

She concluded with a proverb, her voice ringing clear through the chamber. "As our elders say, 'The monkey may climb the tree, but the bird builds its nest there.' Let our enemies exhaust themselves trying to reach us, while we remain secure in our mountain home."

The court fell silent, many chiefs nodding thoughtfully at Abebi's words. Even those who had been skeptical seemed to be reconsidering their stance. All eyes turned to the king, waiting to see how he would respond to this display of strategic acumen.

When he finally spoke, he questioned, "With all that said, you never answered the question I placed before the court, what are the most important traits in a Balogun?"

"Your highness, who am I to not answer when you call. I was simply ruminating on an answer" she bowed, "The members of the council have all given excellent and essential qualities, I can only supplement their suggestions by saying, that it is crucial that the Balogun possesses Iwatutu (a peaceful character), so we do not start unnecessary skirmishes, and Iwapele (a balanced and graceful character), because the Balogun is a representative of the people, but most importantly, with these traits come the wisdom of knowing how and when to act. But the most important of all to me is self-sacrifice." she said, finished saying as she looked sadly at the floor, remembering her late husband.

The court murmured in agreement, and Baale replied, "Very articulate, as always, my daughter, you grace us with your elegance.", Abebi bowed in reverence.

The Kabiyesi smiled, Abebi's words seemed to placate him, and he relaxed onto his throne as though a soothing balm had been rubbed on a sprained joint.

"Self-sacrifice..." the King ruminated for a moment, "Like you displayed on the battlefield that day. I watched from the palace as you rallied the entire army behind you." pockets of murmurs began to form around the court. It was clear where this was going.

Iyalode's voice cut through the growing murmurs. "Let us not forget Abebi's actions," she said, her tone both proud and solemn. "Some may call it savage, but her decapitation of the enemy general saved countless civilian lives. Despite her personal losses, she rallied our troops. It was an act of true bravery and self-sacrifice."

The Baale then added, "I've been speaking to the Baales of neighboring villages and towns about an alliance. Oritameji is strategically placed to make it easier for them to conquer every other one of them easily conquered, should we fall to Omi forces."

Iyalode added, "If every town around us falls, it will only be a matter of time before we fall too."

"Baale, e pe fun wa o. E ku ifojusile" (Baale, may you live long for our sake. Thank you for looking out), "If I may, we need to be careful with our alliances, there's no reason to discount the fact that the last attack might have been done in alliance with one of our neighbors." she bowed.

"Hmm. We cannot trust the Mòlèṣà. We must be careful!" Odofin exclaimed.

"We all know the reason my sister left. We cannot have a repeat of such tragedies." Abeni added.

The Baale, sensing the tension that was building quickly saved face. "Forming alliances with our neighbors is one of the crucial duties of the Balogun during peacetime, Your Highness. I will seize all discussions with other villages in the meantime." he was greeted only with murmurs from his colleagues.

"Another important responsibility is the induction of new Eshos, Your Highness." His eyes glinted as he continued, "In fact, we have a prime candidate here today. Where is Ige?"

At Baale's signal, the guards brought forth a young man, his bearing both proud and humble. Baale's voice swelled with pride as he introduced him. "This young man single-handedly defeated 27 raiders in our recent battle. By the time Abebi reached the battlefield, Ige was standing atop a mountain of fallen enemies."

The court murmured in appreciation as Baale continued. "We've all witnessed his prowess in gidigbo as well. He truly lives up to his name, doesn't he? What do the people say again?"

"Born with his feet planted... the unshakable!" the court responded in unison, their voices filled with admiration.

The king chuckled, a rare sound that drew all eyes to him. "Impressive indeed," he mused, before turning his hidden gaze back to Olugbade. "Perhaps we should consider Ige for the position of Balogun. After all, he seems to have bested your own tally of defeated enemies, Olugbade. I wonder, could you defeat him three times in a row in gidigbo?"

Olugbade's face flushed with barely contained fury, but he remained silent, acutely aware of his precarious position. The court held its breath, sensing the king's words were more than mere jest.

Odofin, unable to contain himself, let out a chuckle, but was met with cold stares from several chiefs. Murmurs rolled through the crowd; some felt the king was going too far with the humiliation of Olugbade.

Sensing the shift in mood, the king thanked Ige for his service. Baale presented the young warrior with a bag of cowries before dismissing him.

The king's voice cut through the murmurs, commanding attention. "You were all assigned your roles for a reason," he said, his tone measured. "Some by heredity, others by merit. But now, more than ever, we must combine our strengths." He paused, allowing his words to sink in. "As our elders say, 'Owó ta fi ns'ọ owó, owó no la fi ns'ọbe.' With the same hands we tie the broom, we craft the blade."

Suddenly, the king's attention snapped back to Olugbade. "Speaking of roles and responsibilities, Olugbade, "What was the reason for your absence on the third day after the battle?" the king pressed, his voice sharp. "Where were you when your people needed leadership and comfort?"

The chief's face reddened further. "I... I had urgent business to attend to, Your Highness. Private matters."

The king rose, stepping close to Olugbade. For the first time in years, the chief saw the king's eyes as he leaned in and whispered, "I know who you met with and what was said."

Olugbade's face drained of color. The king stepped back, adjusting the chief's agbada before returning to his throne. With a resounding slam of his staff on the ground, he declared, "You will not be appointed as Balogun under my rule, Olugbade. Your recent actions have inspired neither trust nor wisdom in this court." He paused, a hint of mockery in his voice. "With perhaps the exception of Ashipa."

The court held its collective breath, waiting for the king's next words. "Which is why," he continued, "I am appointing Abebi to the position of Balogun."

Gasps and exclamations of shock rippled through the crowd. Abebi, who had been observing silently, felt her heart skip a beat.

"Tradition states that a woman can be put in the position in the absence of a viable candidate," the king explained, his tone brooking no argument.

Yet argument came. Osi, one of the chiefs, protested, "But she just had a baby! Two!! Two babies!!!"

Otun added, his voice tinged with disapproval, "Not only did Abebi have two babies, she just completed her mourning period according to customs."

Abebi felt a surge of anger at how they spoke about her as if she weren't present, but she held her tongue, watching the scene unfold.

Iyalode's voice cut through the protests. "Need I remind the court that most of our village has been through a period of mourning? Grief does not disqualify one from duty; if anything, it can sharpen one's resolve."

Otun shot Iyalode a withering look, to which she responded with a serene smile. He sighed, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

As the court erupted into heated discussions, Abebi remained still, her mind racing with the implications of the king's decision. She knew that the real challenge was just beginning.

The king slammed his staff into the ground, silencing the erupting arguments. His voice, when he spoke, carried the weight of finality.

"Hear me," he commanded, the court falling into an uneasy silence. "You will all work together to support Abebi as the regent, until her children are

of age for one to assume the role of Balogun. But mark my words — things will no longer function as they have in the past. Not during my reign, nor after."

He turned his veiled gaze to Olugbade, who stood rigid with barely contained fury. "Olugbade, you will serve as an interim advisor to Abebi. I want Ige inducted as an Esho, he will be the third member of the council. All meetings will be held in my presence until we establish a new defense council - separate from the general council - which will be responsible for all military and defense decisions."

The king paused, his next words cutting through the stunned silence like a blade. "Had the general council heeded the advice to fight from the mountains, we might not have suffered such grievous losses in this war."

Rising from his throne, the king's presence seemed to fill the entire court. "This is my ruling. It is done."

With those words, he turned to leave. Olohunoyin, the court chronicler, began to recite the king's oriki, his melodious voice accompanying the monarch's departure.

As the king exited, the spell of silence broke. The court erupted into a cacophony of whispers and exclamations. Amidst the chaos, Olugbade rose to his feet. His eyes blazed like hot coals, his complexion flushed to match the deep red of his ofi. The fury emanating from him was almost palpable, causing nearby courtiers to step back instinctively.

Without a word, Olugbade strode out of the court, his footsteps echoing in the sudden hush that fell as he passed. No one dared to speak to him, not in

the court, not in the courtyard where he mounted his horse with barely controlled violence.

As Olugbade disappeared into the distance, the remaining chiefs exchanged uneasy glances. The king's decision had shaken the very foundations of their political landscape, and none could predict what would come next.

In the days that followed, Olugbade vanished from public life. For seven long days, he was neither seen nor heard from. The compound of his wives fell silent, with even his youngest bride not daring to approach his hut. The absence of the once-ambitious chief hung over the village like a storm cloud, leaving many to wonder what tempest might be brewing in the wake of the king's shocking decree.

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### **Vignette - Thank you**

*// That was indeed a long one. Thank you for staying till the end.*

## *Prophets and Ghosts of the past - Reckoning*

[DRAFT STATE. COULD BE READ, BUT IS SUBJECT TO BIG  
CHANGES]

Abebi lingered at the corner of the courtyard, watching Olugbade's retreating form. As she turned to leave, she nearly collided with Iyalode. Instinctively, Abebi dropped to her knees in greeting.

Iyalode's weathered face creased into a warm smile as she gently lifted Abebi to her feet. "I am proud of you, my daughter," she said, her voice rich with emotion.

Abebi remained silent, her mind still reeling from the day's events. As they began to walk, she finally found her voice. "Did you know?" she asked, her tone a mix of curiosity and accusation.

Iyalode shook her head. "No, I did not know the King's plans."

Abebi stopped abruptly. "But your recommendation..."

"I had an inkling," Iyalode admitted, turning to face Abebi. "And I might have mentioned it to the King. I just never expected him to actually do it."

"Modupe lowo yin Iyalode, fun adura ati itoju yin fun emi ati awon omo mi, amo..." Abebi said, her voice tinged with gratitude and a hint of reproach. (I am thankful, Iyalode, for your prayers and care for me and my children.

But...) She paused, choosing her words carefully. "I must say that I was upset about how this was handled."

Abebi knelt slightly, a gesture of respect, before continuing. "My husband may be gone, but my decisions don't affect just me. My children are my entire future. The King brought us into the court's games without so much as a warning."

Her voice lowered, heavy with concern. "I feel I was manipulated into humiliating Olugbade. I thought it was simply a grilling session before his appointment. Olugbade is a dangerous man, and now my children are caught in this political web before they can even speak." A solitary tear traced its way down Abebi's cheek.

Iyalode's attempt at comfort fell flat. "Olugbade is a simple brute. He will bring no harm to you or your children."

Abebi's response was swift and sharp. "I always thought him an idiot, but even I respect him enough not to push him over the edge. There's danger in cornering even the simplest of animals. That's what the Kabiyesi just did... push him into a corner!"

Alarm flashed across Iyalode's face. She glanced around furtively before pulling Abebi aside. "You cannot say such things in public," she hissed. "The walls have ears. This could be seen as calling the King incompetent." Her voice softened. "I will visit you soon. Air your grievances to me in private then." With that, Iyalode disappeared back into the courtyard.

As Abebi watched Iyalode leave, an unsettling sensation crept over her. She felt watched, observed by unseen eyes. She turned, finding only empty air, yet the feeling persisted.

On her walk home, the sensation evolved into an inexplicable pull. After a moment's hesitation, she surrendered to it, allowing herself to be drawn like a moth to flame. Her feet carried her to a familiar grove just outside the village, where flowers lined a verdant slope. Atop that slope lay the boulder where she had spent countless evenings as a young woman.

In the heart of the grove sat Ifatoyin, his back to her. Without turning, he spoke. "It would appear the time has come for us to talk." He stood, gesturing towards the boulder. "This was the last place I saw you before I departed. You were sitting up there, with the great Ajanaku."

His eyes, ancient and knowing, met hers. "I was there the day he earned that nickname. I was there when your mother arrived in these lands. I was even there when your sister was exiled. None of you could see me, but I was there."

The old man's head tilted, his gaze softening. "Oh, my poor daughter, life has not been fair to you of late."

Abebi's thought, 'Why is everyone suddenly calling me their daughter today?' was met with a chuckle from Ifatoyin. "We watched you grow up,"

he explained. "As the saying goes, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' To us, you are our daughter, even in your adulthood."

"Walk with me, my daughter," he said, setting off along a hidden path. "I know you worry about your children and today's events at court. Do not fret. I am watching over those children even now. And as for Olugbade, no harm shall come from him to you or your little ones."

They came upon two small boulders, and Ifatoyin sat, gesturing for Abebi to join him. "I know you have many questions, some about me, some about yourself. Let me start with the first question on your mind: 'Where have I been all these years?'"

His voice took on a rhythmic cadence, like a storyteller of old. "My life's duty has always been as an emissary, a messenger of the gods. While I have no special powers, other than those afforded by my charms, I have lived for a very long time."

Ifatoyin's hands moved as he spoke, painting pictures in the air. "My time in this town is but a mere fraction of the life I've lived. I have walked across deserts, crossed great rivers and lakes, seen civilizations rise and fall. I left this kingdom when my work here was done, and I was needed elsewhere."

He paused, a smile crinkling his eyes. Abebi bowed slightly, returning the smile.

"As for your second question," he continued, "whether I am alive or dead is... complex. I have dwelt in the land of the dead, yet for all intents and purposes, I am still a man. I age, though much more slowly than others."

Ifatoyin stood, his demeanor shifting. "But now is not the time to speak of me. We have much to do." He began walking again, Abebi falling into step beside him.

"I have returned because I've been sent on a new assignment. The most important task is the Ayewo of your children's future." His voice took on a solemn tone. "Return here before dawn. Wear all white, and bring your children with you."

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the grove, Abebi felt a mix of anticipation and trepidation. The future, it seemed, was about to unfold in ways she could scarcely imagine.

### ***Winds of the past - We prayed to have her***

***>> Chapter is still in the works, but ready to be read***

When Abebi got out of bed the next morning, the first thing she did was check on the babies, they were still asleep. She stepped outside, and she looked up at the sky, the moon was still out, but it was clear that dawn was close.

She returned into the hut and she did as Ifatoyin requested, she wore all white buba (top), iro (wrapper) and gele (headtie akin to scarf). She also wrapped the babies in white wrappers as well. Then, she set out.

It was a little chilly outside, the sky was very clear, and the moonlight shone on the path leading to the grove. When she made it to the grove, she realized Ifatoyin never left that spot the previous day. He simply had been waiting the whole time.

She greeted the old man with a kneel, and then, she placed the babies' baskets on her sides, Abidogun on the left, and Abogunde on the right. As she sat, Fatoye greeted her with a nod, and he smiled, staring into her eyes.

He then, stretched out both of his arms, as if asking her to hand the babies over. Abebi hesitated, but when she reached for the first baby, Ifatoye shook his head and said, "No, your hands, and close your eyes" he said, there is something I must show you.

Abebi reluctantly gave him her hands and closed her eyes. He held her hands tenderly, and began to speak incantations in a language she did not understand. Then, all of a sudden, she felt a little jolt, and when she opened her eyes, she noticed something strange.

She tried to move her hands, but they remained still, but she could feel as though they had moved. So, she pulled her right arm and broke contact with Ifatoyin's hand. It was when she did that she realized she was no longer in her body.

Ifatoyn pulled her closer, and they floated above their bodies below. This shocked Abebi and she began to panic. Ifatoyn held her by the arms and assured her that it was going to be okay.

When Abebi had settled, he began to speak, he asked.

“Have you ever heard of [?. mad god’s name here]?”

“No, I have never heard of him. Is he one of the Orisha?” she asked.

Ifatoyn responded saying, “No, it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“As an emissary, I am one of the only few entities in the cosmos of the living and the dead that can come through this gate without incurring his wrath. And even I have limited access here.” Ifatoyn said.

“Before we begin, I want to tell you a story, or rather, show you one.”

Ifatoyn said, “Would you like to listen to my story?” he inquired genuinely, and Abebi responded that she indeed would like to hear his story. This made the old man smile, he then snapped his fingers, and a wall of clouds surrounded the grove, sealing the grove away from everything else.

Ifatoye then dipped his fingers into the empty space between them, and he pulled the fabric away, revealing a mirror. The mirror initially was shattered, with many shards showing people Abebi had never seen before.

Ifatoyn then began to rub the shards mirror into each other, and it all eventually blended into a smooth surface. When Abebi looked into this mirror, she did not see herself, but rather, she saw a young man. He was a

hunter sitting alone in a forest, lost in thought, his bag next to him. She was about to inquire who this man was when Ifatoyin began to speak.

“Once upon a time, there was a King, descended from Oduduwa himself, and he ruled in a prosperous kingdom. He had two sons, Adegoroye and Adeyegan. Adeyegan was the elder brother, and he was a wise man, while Adegoroye was a powerful man, a gifted herbalist and a phenomenal hunter.

When Adegoroye was at the age of 15, he fought and killed a lioness, and this fuelled Adegoroye’s desire for challenging combat, so, he became a professional hunter, venturing into the forests, not to hunt for meat, but to hunt for adventure.”

Abebi nodded and said, “His desire to hunt adventures reminds me of someone I used to know.” to which Ifatoyin replied, “Indeed, he does, [Abeni’s lover’s name here] was a phenomenal man, burdened by an inescapable fate.”

Abebi responded sadly, saying, “He truly did, I only wish he hadn’t taken my only sister with him.” Ifatoyin nodded, and he observed a moment of silence, then, he continued his story. As he continued, the man stood up and began to traverse the forest, the images in the mirror began to shift as though they were following the words of Ifatoyin.

“Adegoroye went into every dangerous forest there was, and he battled beast, monster and spirits alike. He was fought an Iwin to a standstill. The

Iwin was so impressed by his strength that it gave him a whistle. And it was through this whistle that I first met Adegoroye. But that is a story for another day."

When he returned home, some of the people in the village began to talk, some called him a demon. Adegoroye had no claim to the throne, and he had no interest in ruling, so, he requested permission from his father to leave the town and find a place to settle. He left the town alongside 3 other hunters.

Adegoroye wandered across the forest and after about 7 days traveling between villages and forests, he came upon a terrible forest, which took him 30 days to summout.

When he arrived on the other side, of the 4 hunters that began the journey, only two had made it this far. The first village they came across was a village of sorcerers. I have also been to this village, and this village has no location. It is a village that appears and disappears as it pleases.

At this village, Adegoroye acquired a few charms, a few of which were, two teleportation charms with one use each, and two protection charms. After acquiring this charms, he realized that he had been tricked. The rule of this city is that anyone who acquires charms from there are unable to use the charms themselves. Adegoroye stormed out of this town in anger and vowed to never return.

After departing from that village, they found a small village of the aboriginal inhabitants of this place. Among this people was a woman, her name was Oyinlewa, and she was strikingly beautiful. She had skin as dark as ebony wood, with consistency as smooth as the surface of a moonlit lake.

But the most striking thing about this woman was something Adegoroye had never seen in anyone before, and that he would never see again until the day he died. She had heterochromia, one of her eyes was blue, the color of a clear sunny day, and the other was grey, the color of a cloudy day.”

When Ifatoye said this, Abebi’s jaw dropped. In the mirror was a spitting image of her mother. Ifatoyin noticed her reaction and simply just nodded and continued his story.

“Adegoroye was a man that up until this point barely took notice of any women, but this one, he could not take his eyes off of. He was immediately lovestricken. He began to court this woman, and soon wanted to take her hand in marriage.

But this town did not have a king, nor did this woman have parents he could request her hand from. She simply lived with the people of the village.

Adegoroye then asked for her hand from the people of the village, but they refused him. But Adegoroye persisted until one day, the people agreed that Adegoroye could marry their daughter under one condition.

Before he heard what the request was, he agreed to the condition, and this would prove to be a grave mistake, but he was in love. There was nothing that would stop him from marrying this woman but death.”

“The request was for Adegoroye to kill a leopard that had plagued this town. The leopard had taken both young and old. When, Adegoroye heard this, he was sure he would make short work of the leopard. He had killed lions and leopards before.”

“But when he saw this leopard, he was surprised. It was black from head to toe, and it was bigger and swifter than any he had ever fought. While trying to goad the leopard out. The leopard jumped on him from a tree. It was in this battle that he lost his left eye.” Ifatoyin pointed at his eye.

“He could not use his weapons or charms, and had to wrestle the leopard to death with his bare hands. When he emerged from the forest with the body of the leopard hanging over his shoulders, the villagers declared him a demi-god and they approved the union of Oyinlewa and Adegoroye.”

Adegoroye begged his comrade to return home to their hometown to request all of the items requested for the wedding, which are as follows: 17 cows, 17 goats, 17 chickens, 17 atare. He also sent for priests, servants, hunters. The hunter used Adegoroye’s teleportation charms, and within a day, he returned with all that Adegoroye had requested, the charm bringing all of it at once.

Adegoroye spent the rest of his life searching for the village of sorcerers but never found it again. He wished he hadn’t stormed out like he had.” Ifatoyin

stopped and laughed a little, then, he continued, his voice taking on a somber tone as he recounted the next chapter in Adegoroye's life.

"Adegoroye cleared out a swath of land, expanding the village, and decided to settle down there. He established trading routes with his father's kingdom and opened the town to the rest of the kingdom. Under his leadership, the village grew and prospered, attracting people from far and wide.

Queen Oyinlewa was a clever woman, she negotiated trade with every kingdom that got on the route to this part of the country to engage in any form of mercantilism. She was cunning with wisdom, generous to a fault. She was so revered and gifted that one of her apprentices is who became Iyalode in this kingdom.

"After further expanding the village and bringing in artisans and blacksmiths, Adegoroye decided to establish his own kingdom in this town. He was met with little resistance, as the people were happy with the growth he had brought. Adegoroye had not tried to take power with hostility, he had saved the village from the dreadful leopard and he was loyally married to Oyinlewa, so, they considered him one of their own.

"King Adegoroye and his newly wed bride, Queen Oyinlewa, tried for years to have children, but they could not. The King, being familiar with the ways of Isegun and well-versed in herbs, charms, and even the Odu Ifa, tried every trick in his book, but to no avail. Despite their best efforts, the royal couple remained childless, casting a shadow over their otherwise prosperous reign. They traveled far and near, offering every sacrifice they could and performing many many fertility rituals, all to no avail."

Ifatoyin paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. Abebi, listened intently. While she knew most of her mother's life story, she knew little about her father.

He had died when the girls were little, and her mother never shared stories about him because they brought her sorrow.

- [DESCRIBE WHO THEY BEGGED FOR CHILDREN AND WHAT THEY DID—STILL IN THE WORKS].

Ifatoyin picked up the story once more, his expression growing more serious as he delved into the next part of the tale.

"But when the expected child was to be born, they realized that not only was it not a boy (for the king wanted a boy), but it was twin girls. One of them had blue eyes, the color of the sky on clear days, and her mother named her Abeni (we prayed to have her)." he said, then, pointing at Abebi, he said, "The other had grey eyes, the color of the sky on cloudy days, and her mother named her...", and they said in unison, "Abebi." (we prayed to birth her).

"At this point in his life, the King was getting old, and pressured by his need to father an heir, he was forced to take in new wives from other kingdoms, none of which he loved as much as his first wife," Ifatoyin continued.

"When the ayewo of these children was done, it was said that one of them, in their prime, would bring about doom for a city. And soon after, she would die, leaving behind her pestilence and scourge."

Ifatoyin's voice grew somber. "This was not a welcome prophecy, so the King ordered that the prophecy be kept a secret until they could figure out a way to avert it. The Babalawo did so. However, one of the other wives had overheard this prophecy."

"She employed one of the guards to be a spy for her, and she monitored as they tried the sacrifice that the Babalawo recommended, but it failed. The guard

reported back to her that there was a sacrifice performed, but that it was not accepted."

"Upon hearing this, this woman decided to spread this secret of your mother's. She disguised herself and went into the village market where she planted it in the ears of a few market women, and soon the prophecy spread like wildfire."

The people then took interest in the results of the rituals. The king called on all the Babalawo he knew, and they all came to a conclusion on all the Orisha that they needed to appeal to, and what rites and rituals to perform.

They tried for 21 days, but none of the sacrifices were accepted (Ebo o ru). Rather than be forced to leave the town in shame, on the night of the 20th day, the queen exiled herself from the village, and departed from the town on a journey to prevent the prophecy. On the 21st day, many departed from the Kingdom and followed the queen into exile.

She traveled across the country in search of a way to avert this prophecy, and she performed every rite and partook in every sacrifice that was recommended. But the visions from the seers remained the same. On one of her visits, someone recommended that she seek a man named Saworo.

Her imperative became to seek out this man. No one knows his real name, but he has brass bells around his ankle, similar to my shells. Saworo is not my blood brother, but he is my brother in duty. The same way I serve as a conduit for story and prophecy gods, he stands as a conduit for healer and diviner gods.

He had a special gift, an unnatural intuition with herbs and charm making. When Oyinlewa got to the village where he stayed, she departed from her traveling company and left her children behind, for she said

'If this man is as powerful as they say, he does not need to see anything other than me in person. If he can tell me my story, or explain the anguish that has led me on this tumultuous journey, then, I would listen to what he has to say. I need to know that this journey is going to be the last one.'

"When Oyinlewa entered Saworo's shrine, he looked into her eyes and said, 'Why do you wish to hide your bukata from the Orisha? Your destiny is not a burden, but a gift. Embrace it, and you shall find the strength to overcome any obstacle. Bring everything here. I have room to spear.'"

Abebi listened intently, her heart pounding in her chest as Ifatoyin continued the tale.

"Oyinlewa was taken aback by Saworo's words, but she knew he spoke the truth. Your mother then called her entire caravan and they stayed with Saworo for a few days. During those days, Saworo went to work on these babies and their mother."

"Meanwhile, back in the kingdom, the younger queen's unruly behavior and animosity towards the King had taken its toll. Within a few years after Oyinlewa's departure, the King died. Some said it was from a broken heart, while others whispered that he was poisoned."

"By the time she left Saworo's place, the visions had changed, the prophecy seemed to have been averted. Oyinlewa, rather than return home, decided to travel further south, and at the edge of a mountainside, she settled with her followers and sent out scouts. But her scouts soon discovered a thriving Kingdom not far from their new home.

Intrigued, Oyinlewa sent her men to the neighboring villages that were under the rule of this kingdom, pretending to harbor hatred for the kingdom. To the surprise of her scouts, none of the other cities shared their animosity. In fact, a

chief in one of these villages praised the town as a shining example for all the other villages to follow."

"Determined to learn more, Oyinlewa met with the King of this prosperous town, bringing with her many gifts. She shared her story and requested land near his domain. The King, moved by her plight, agreed to let her settle nearby."

"However, when Oyinlewa asked for the naturalization of her followers, the King hesitated. Undeterred, she described the various skills her people possessed and the trade they could bring to the town. To sweeten the deal, she offered to pay taxes for seven years in exchange for their citizenship in this kingdom."

"The King, impressed by Oyinlewa's offer and the potential benefits for his town, agreed to her terms. And so, Oyinlewa and her followers began to build a new life in the shadow of this prosperous city, their destinies intertwined with the fate of the town that had welcomed them."

"As the years passed, Oyinlewa's wisdom and leadership helped her people thrive. The twin girls, Abeni and Abebi, grew into beautiful young women, their unique eyes captivating all who met them, but there was more to the women. They had unnatural strength and one of them had an affinity for the creation of charms and was the youngest Iyanifa in the history of the kingdom, while the other possessed wisdom for her age. But a few years down the road, Oyinlewa began to have nightmares about the prophecy. It seemed as though the prophecy loomed over them like a dark cloud, waiting to unleash its fury upon the unsuspecting town. We both know how that story ends." Ifagbemi finished speaking.

"Why do I tell you this story? Because I want you to make a conscious decision before engaging in this ritual. What we see could lead you on a very tumultuous journey in life. It could uproot you from your current position and put your life in

disarray. Secondly, your mother had the support of Adegoroye, even after she left the town. Given that the father of these children is no longer with us—a difficult burden by itself, what we see could either alleviate or aggravate this burden. Choose carefully.” he emphasized.

Abebi took a moment to think, she looked down at the babies below, then, she began to speak, she said. “Baba Ifatoyin, [?. Add a well thought out response about how her children are the rest of her world now, and their welfare is the only position of concern in her life]

Abebi’s response made Ifatoyin smile. He could not have been prouder of Abebi if she was his own daughter. He then, began to speak.

“For the Yoruba, there are two set points in life, Ijo abini (the day you are born) and Ijo iku (the day of death). Any point in between these two points can be divined with Ifa and ultimately adjusted/fixed. But not any of those two days. Changing them leads to grave consequences.” he said as he closed up the mirror, returning the space back to its original form.

“It is unfortunate that things are set like this, but it is the law of the cosmos. Your sister would know.” he said sadly.

Abebi’s eyes lit up at the mention of her sister, she then said, “About Abeni, is there a way I could see where she is through the mirrors? I miss her so much, and it would bring me great comfort to see her again.” she inquired, but before she could finish the question, Ifatoyin shook his head, and he responded.

“Abeni’s situation is complicated, and the deity whose realm we are at right now is the deity of cosmic balance. To show you what you seek would be to create that

imbalance and incur his wrath.” Abebi’s disappointment was almost palpable upon hearing this.

Sensing this, Ifatoyin continued, saying, “Like everything else, the time will come when your wish would be granted.”

### ***Unnamed Chapter***

Back at the hut, Abeni and Morenikeji were cleaning the babies, and were about to put them in freshly washed clothes when Abeni began to speak, she discussed her ordeal with Ifatoyin. She told Morenikeji about the strange encounter, and how she exited her body. Morenikeji did not believe the claim at first, but as Abeni described who Ifatoyin had claimed he was and his explanation of how he still looks the same after so long, Morenikeji began to entertain the possibility of truth. She discussed how Ifatoyin had walked her through the history of where she came from, and discussed briefly about the decision she has to make regarding the Ayewo. After she had finished speaking, Morenikeji ventured to ask the question, “What happened to your father?”

Abebi began with a sigh, then, she began to speak. “After my mother settled here, she received some visitors from my father’s kingdom. I did not know who those people were at the time, and I did not find out the nature of her relationship with my father until after she had died.

The visitors brought news of my father’s illness, and stated that he had secretly sent scouts to scour the country in search of her. But my mother refused to return with the messengers. She told them the name of a city called Ibagbe, and on their anniversary, they met in this town. The king would leave the city under the guise of pilgrimage and official duties, but would actually come to this village to spend

time with my mother, and she would take us with her sometimes. I still have vague memories of spending time with him.”

She passed the first baby to Morenikeji to dress and began cleaning the second.

“One day, my mother travelled to meet him as usual, but when she got there, she was met by his absence. What was even stranger was, in all his dealings, he was rarely ever late, and if he was ever held up by anything, he would send his best rider out to deliver a message to the other party even before it was clear that he would be unable to make it in time. Yet, there was nothing, not even a messenger.

Three days later, his rider did come, but he did not bring a message, he brought sad news, the king was dead. He had been ambushed by assassins. And while he did survive the ambush, he was confined to bed in the palace. He confined himself to bed and refused to eat. Then, 7 days later, he had a meal, and then, he suddenly died. When my mother returned home, she was stricken by grief, and she stopped leaving the house. She died in her hut shortly after this. Your mother has been a mother to lots of people in this town, and of the many recipients of her kindness, my sister and I are some of the biggest. To me, you are a sister, closer to me than anyone but my own twin.”

Morenike smiled, then, she asked, “Have you decided what you are going to do?”

Abebi shook her head in response, and they continued their task in silence. Outside, clouds had began to form, and it was going to rain soon. Morenikeji left shortly and returned home.

Abebi spent the rest of the evening thinking about today’s experience, and before she went to bed, she made a decision to perform the Ayewo. “I have nothing but this children to live for.” she muttered in the darkness. Shortly after, she fell asleep.



*Vignette - Ifatoyin*

## ***Unfamiliar Alliances - Iwofa***

Iyalode sat outside her hut, lost in thought about what Abebi had said to her outside the courthouse. The complicated relationship between the King and Olugbade, she knew Olugbade was a tough bastard, and would not let the humiliation go, she was sure he was going to do something rash. She chewed on the first half of her kolanut and sighed. But as she chewed on the last half of the kolanut, she is approached by a tall, slender man. She had seen him around the village before but knew nothing about him. As he drew near, he fell to one knee and introduced himself as Aláká.

"I am the son of a farmer from Ijimo village<sup>4</sup>." Aláká began, his voice soft but steady. "When my father died, I inherited his yam farm, but rather than a blessing, my path has been laden with misfortune. A devastating pestilence claimed my crops, leaving the land barren."

Iyalode listened intently, her eyes studying the man before her.

"But the elders have a saying, Ise loogun ise" (hardwork is the antidote to poverty). Aláká continued, a glimmer of determination in his eyes. "I decided that the pestilence of the last season won't be the end for me. I decided to brace for the next season, replanting all of my lost crop."

He paused, his shoulders slumping slightly. "However, when I tried, I encountered even more adversity. My son, Olayinka, fell ill. I wanted to hire

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<sup>4</sup> One of the neighboring villages allied with Oritameje

workers to help with the planting, but I did not have the money to meet the timeline for the planting season."

Iyalode's brow furrowed with concern. "And how is your son now?" she asked.

"He is hale and hearty." Aláká replied, a small smile tugging at his lips.

"How old is he?" she asked, "He is seven years old." he replied.

Iyalode nodded, her mind working. "So, he cannot assist you with your labor. How can I be of assistance then?"

Aláká bowed his head, offering his condolences. "I was deeply saddened by your son's passing. He was someone I always looked up to. Yesterday evening, as I walked by his farm, I noticed that the palm trees were beginning to ripen for harvest."

He met her gaze, his eyes earnest. "It is my humble plea that you accept my offer for Iwofa. Allow me the honor of harvesting your son's farm in a month's time. I commit to overseeing the entire process of harvest and maintenance over the next few months, until the beginning of the next rainy season when I will need to plant my new yam crops."

Iyalode hesitated, her instinct to turn him away. She did not like to perform favors for those who were not members of the village.

Sensing her reluctance, Aláká persisted. "I know I am not from here, but the reason I may look familiar is that I have been bringing my son to this village for treatment. I went around, telling people my story, and over and over again, they spoke of your unending kindness and help."

He clasped his hands together, his voice taking on a pleading tone. "I will take anything. Bi a ko ba reni fehinti, bi ole la ri (If we have no one to rely on, our misfortune may appear to be a result of laziness to the world). Though I am not from here, my grandmother was. She was the only daughter of her parents, and she married my grandfather, which is why you may not recognize me. She is from the [?. insert family line here]."

Iyalode considered his words, her mind weighing the options. "I will consider it, but it is unlikely that I will be able to help."

Aláká, sensing an opening, sweetened the deal. "In addition to the help and the repayment of the principal, you will have a claim to a portion of the yam crop yield. This agreement will be mutually beneficial, I assure you. But you will have zero claim to my farm because of my family ties."

Iyalode sighed, her resolve wavering. "I still need time to think. Return in three days, and I will give you my answer."

Aláká bowed deeply, gratitude etched on his face. "Thank you for considering my proposal. I will return in three days, eagerly awaiting your decision."

As he walked away, Iyalode watched him go, her mind already turning over the possibilities and risks of the agreement. She had much to contemplate in the days ahead.

### ***Unfamiliar Alliances - Iwofa II***

During those three days, Iyalode investigated Alaka's story, relying on her network of informants and trusted individuals within the village. They confirmed that he had indeed been bringing a boy for treatment and had spoken to several farmers, seeking help. However, the location of his alleged farm remained unverified.

Iyalode's brow furrowed as she sought out yam farmers, inquiring about their crops. While most reported favorable conditions, one farmer, known for supplying a significant portion of the village's trade yams, recounted a situation mirroring Alaka's description. Intrigued, Iyalode made a mental note of the farm's proximity to Alaka's supposed land.

When Alaka returned, Iyalode sent one of her most trusted assistants to accompany him to the farm, seeking proof of its existence. The assistant returned, confirming the farm's legitimacy. Iyalode, her eyes softening, apologized for the back and forth, revealing, "I've been on edge since the battle. Unfounded trust is a luxury I cannot afford."

Alaka, his voice filled with understanding, replied, "A pẹ ko to jẹun, ki jẹ ibajẹ. (It is better to exercise patience while seeking a durable solution in difficult situations than to hastily accept an ill-conceived one.)"

Iyalode was impressed by this young man's wit and enjoyed his generous use of aphorisms. She invited him inside and offered him food and inquired about his son's absence. Abiodun explained, "I sent him to live with my brother to conserve resources."

Iyalode, her eyes sparkling with curiosity, asked, "Your brother, does he speak in parables like you do as well?"

Abiodun's smile was warm and genuine. "It is a habit we learned from our parents. They spoke to each other with aphorisms all the time, weaving wisdom into their daily conversations."

Iyalode nodded, a hint of nostalgia in her voice, "Most of today's youth do not even know half of the wisdom they have missed out on learning, let alone be able to effectively utilize them in their day-to-day life."

Her gaze drifted to the window, as if peering into a distant memory. "There was a time when our elders' words were cherished, their guidance sought after. Now, it seems the younger generation is more interested in chasing their own ambitions, forgetting the valuable lessons of the past. Those lessons make the pursuit of ambition pointless, for the keys to success lie in the palms of wisdom."

Alaka thanked her for her kind words and said, "My father once told me, 'Eni tí ò lè ì se àwọn tí ó nira kì í se àwọn tí ó ròrùn.' (He who cannot do the difficult things cannot do the easy ones). I have faced many challenges in my life, but his wisdom thought me that it is through these challenges that we grow, that we discover our true strength."

Iyalode smiled softly and replied "Your father was a wise man, and it appears you learned important lessons from him"

"Yes, and there is still much more to learn about the world, which is why I am seeking this opportunity. It is not just a way to get money, but also a way to learn, from you." Alaka replied.

Leaning forward, Iyalode began with an aphorism: "Back to the matter on hand, Igi gogoro magun mi loju okere lati n wo (Translation: O large log, don't poke me in the eye is a statement best said from safety). A perceived danger should be avoided." Her eyes met his, her voice firm, "Why should I invest in a farm previously wrought by pestilence? What assurance do I have that new crops will survive?"

Alaka, his fingers interlaced, suggested, "Pests rely on food to survive. Leaving the land barren for a season would starve the pests, and by next season, the farm should be ready."

Iyalode thought about it for a moment and then shook her head, "Are we fully certain that this was a pest problem?"

"I think crop rotation would be wiser. Sorghum and millet are different enough from yams. They require less rainfall and have shorter harvest cycles, so, you can still plant this year." A smile tugged at her lips, "It's your lucky day. On behalf of the farmers, I negotiated with The Baale and he has arranged for the King to open the granary to the public. Make your way to the palace before tomorrow, and you'll receive grains for free."

Alaka, gratitude etched on his face, raised a concern, "I am grateful for your wisdom, but I have little experience with sorghum and millet, and I am hesitant to grow those crops."

Iyalode's expression changed, and she replied, "Wa olore re lo si waju nigbayen. (Be on your way and seek assistance from others then)."

Alaka, his hands raised in a placating gesture quickly replied, saying, "Ki won ma ba ni alaimore ni mi. Mi o kan fe tan yin je ni. (I simply wish to be transparent, so, they do not say I am an ungrateful man) I meant no disrespect."

Iyalode, nodding thoughtfully, proposed a trial period. "To confirm your competence, you'll not receive your loan until after the first successful and timely harvest from my son's farm. If successful, you can plant the millet and sorghum. If you fail, I'll pay you half of what I'd pay another for the labor, and I retain the right to collect all the produce from the harvest if I see fit."

Alaka, his eyes downcast, repeated the aphorism, "A pe koto jeun kin je baje." He revealed the existence of an abusive Iwofa lender in his village, always twisting terms to exploit victims. "When I lost my crops, he offered me a deal without a hint of concern for my farm's success. It felt like signing up for slavery." He looked up, and said, "I was right to seek help from you. Thank you for showing interest in my success."

Iyalode smiled and extended her hand, "Agreed to the terms?"

Alaka, prostrated flat on the floor, then he looked up and nodded, "I agree to the terms."

Iyalode called Morenike from inside, and instructed her to show Alaka the farmland.

As Morenike and a guard led Alaka to survey the land, Iyalode watched them go, she was still unsure of her decision, but then she mumbled to herself, "Whatever may come of this, an unpaid loan is a favor owed", and she retired back into her quarters.

## **Chapter 6: Machinations at moonfall**

*Edan*

## **PART 2**

### **Chapter 1: The Shackles of Legacy**

*The dancing peacock*

The sun was going down, it was just about time for the guards to switch posts. Boahinmaa knew she had to get home soon, else, she would not be

able to get back into the compound without being spotted by one of the guards, her heart burdened with a secret she dared not share.

At first, she had her eyes fixed on the floor as she walked. She could not get the image out of her head, ‘Kwabena...’ she thought to herself. Then, the thought occurred to her, ‘What if he is following me?’ She stopped walking and her eyes began to dart in all directions, half expecting Kwabena to be hot on her heels. She picked up the pace and began to run.

She soon made it to the compound, and luckily, the guards were distracted and failed to see her sneak in through her secret passage. The weight of her impending marriage to Kwabena—whose hidden truths she accidentally uncovered—made her steps heavy with dread.

As Boahinmaa slipped through the heavy wooden gates of her family's compound, the familiar sight of the sprawling estate that sprawled before her did little to ease the turmoil within.

The main house, a grand structure of mud brick and wood, stood majestically against the twilight sky, its large, intricately carved wooden doors and windows telling tales of wealth and power. The compound was a hive of activity during the day, with servants bustling about and the air filled with the sounds of commerce and conversation. Now, it lay in a deceptive calm, the only sounds the distant chatter of the guards and the soft rustling of the wind through the baobab trees that dotted the landscape.

Boahinmaa's steps were leaden as she navigated the familiar paths, her mind a whirlwind of fear and confusion. The house, with its vast corridors and high ceilings, always seemed to close in on her, each step echoing her deepening sense of entrapment. She never really felt free here.

As she stumbled through the main hall, the scent of incense and the soft glow of lanterns did little to comfort her. She rounded the corner, and ran into her mother, Ama, who had in her hands a bundle of textiles. A few of the fabrics fell to the floor as they collided.

"I'm so sorry" Boah apologized as she began to pick the clothes off the floor.

Amongst the fabrics were two different designs of Asafo flags. These colorful flags were used by Asafo companies, warrior groups with social and military functions. The first one was made from silk—the rarest of fabrics in Ama's collection, a first of its kind, and the other was made from cotton.

As Boah picked up the silk flag, Ama commented, "That is for the Asafohene... your future father-in-law." she smiled at Boah as she arose, and said, "Follow me, I was about to go finish working on the flag."

As they walked, Ama, with her keen eyes, noticed her daughter's distress and asked "What troubles you, my child?". With a heavy heart, and words rushing through her head, she looked at her mother, and said, "Nothing... nothing troubles me." She lied, and her mother said nothing in response.

They entered the room, it was adorned with rich textiles and the warmth of a nearby hearth.

“Put them over there and take a seat with me.” Ama said, pointing at a workbench, then, she pulled two stools together by the hearth. They both sat, and again, Boah planted her gaze into the floor, while her mother stared at her.

“You suckled on my breasts, you know...” Ama said, “...I know when something is wrong with you, will you please share what is going on with your mother?” she probed.

After a few seconds of silence, Boah broke eye contact with the floor and looked at her mother. A tear fell from her eye as she asked, “Why am I being sold off?”

Ama was perplexed by the question, “Sold off?” she questioned, “What? Why would you thi-?” she stopped, “There are thousands of girls that will give an eye to being in your position right now.” she said, disappointed in the statement.

“Then, why are you making me marry a man I do not know??” Boahinmaa burst out in frustration, her voice, usually so strong and assured, broke with the weight of her confession.

Ama heard the emotion and passion in her daughter’s soul and knew she had to listen. The words tumbling out in a rush of emotion. She spoke of

the arranged marriage, of her fears of being bound to a stranger, and the deep-seated unease that had taken root in her soul.

After Boah had finished speaking, Ama looked into the flickering glow of a single lantern that hung on the wall behind her daughter and remembered her own youth and the years leading up to her marriage.

"Life often asks us to walk paths we would not choose for ourselves," Ama replied compassionately. "Did I ever tell you about my first marriage?" Ama began, her voice a soft blend of nostalgia and pain. Boah, still distraught, replied, "Yes, but you knew and loved my father before you married him."

"Not at first," Ama corrected gently. She leaned forward, the light casting shadows that danced across her face as she recounted a tale not of love, but of survival. "When I was a kid, Maame died during childbirth. After Maame died, Agya (my father) lost hope... Life got harder. We worked hard on the farm, but my father in his despair could not tend to the crop effectively." she stopped, letting out a big sigh as she stared at the ceiling of the house. "He tried his best, you know... but there was a drought, the farm was large, and we were too small to help with all the work."

"After the dry season took a whole year's harvest from us, we began to starve. Myself and my brother will go foraging with very little success." She stood up and picked up the flag from the workbench and returned to the stool with a needle in hand. She sat down and began to work on the flag.

"After we ran out of grains and tubers, we killed the livestock, and smoked the meat. This lasted us for a few moons... Then, we were completely out of

food, and we starved for days. Agya left one day in search of food and did not return for days." she stopped and smiled at Boah who simply had a perplexed look on her face. She had never heard the story before.

"He returned three days later. My brother was on the verge of death, when Agya returned with some food. We made it till the next day, I awoke the next day wishing I had died." she stopped again, taking a breather.

"I was forced to marry a man decades older than I was. He was older than my father and already burdened with four wives." she said, "He had a... he had this cough." she said, furrowing her brows.

"The cough that never seemed to leave him... it was nsamanwa." Boah's heart clenched at the mention of the disease, a silent thief of breath and life. Ama shared the loss of her own father soon after, the threads of her family unraveling with the death of each.

"With the man that was supposed to provide for us dead, and my father passing away too. We were finished. My brother came to my husband's house to inform me of my father's passing."

"My brother, driven by dreams of wealth from gold mining and trading with traders from the north, vanished like mist over the river. He promised to return too, but unlike my father, he never actually did. My journey to find him led me instead to a life working for a merchant in the capital city."

“Is that...?” Boah interjected. “Nana Boakye...”, “He is not your real father...?” her words tumbled out, disjointed and confused.

“A twist of fate that became my salvation... Nana Boakye took me in because of my acumen and my creativity.” she said, raising the flag to show Boah the embroidery she had made. “And it was through Nana Boakye that I met your father.” she said, setting the flag down.

“An arranged marriage, yes, but it brought me here, to this life, to you.” She stood up and held her daughter by the cheeks.

“I would never sell you off. You are my daughter, my legacy, the love of my life.” she said as she stroked Boah’s long hair.

Boah was overwhelmed by the story, but the storm inside her had yet to subside. She looked into her mother’s eyes and was tempted to share the true source of her distress. ‘Would she understand?’ Boah wondered to herself, and as she was about to let the words out, she instead embraced her mother and said, “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Your story has brought me comfort. I am ungrateful, despite my privilege.” she said.

“Oh my daughter... that was not the point of my story...” Ama said, gently pushing Boah back, just enough to look into her eyes. “My child, the strength of our ancestors flows through you. Your feelings, your doubts, they do not make you ungrateful. They make you human,” Ama said, her voice firm yet tender. Boah nodded, the weight of her mother’s words sinking in.

“My journey, even though it was fraught with hardships and difficulties, was a testament to resilience and hope—a legacy that you too are a part of... this marriage is going to be tough for various reasons.” she said, adjusting back to a sitting position.

“Kwabena is from a family of warriors, you will need to tend to issues with wisdom, as he will not understand the intricacies of commerce. He is also beloved by every woman in the capital. A man like that cannot be handled with an iron hand, but rather with delicacy. But whatever challenges this marriage brings you, I will be here for you.” She said, crossing her arms over her chest.

She then picked up the Asafo flag and held it by the seams to display the design she created to Boah. “Now, what do you think of the design?”

Boah gazed at the flag, it had a striking contrast of maroon and gold pattern, depicting the rays of the sun, with a square-shaped emblem in the center, and inside it, an embroidered golden peacock that appeared to be dancing. “This is one of your best works ever.” Boah smiled, complimenting her mother.

And there it was, the peace she had been craving all evening, the event that kicked all these off still lingered in her mind, but the object of her worry had been swept to the back of her mind.

### ***Chance Encounters***

Boah found herself craving the solace of the vast beyond, outside the city. She hadn’t left the house since the day she had a talk with her mother. As

her marriage loomed, her responsibilities within the family business had grown exponentially. She was being groomed to inherit the empire, a task that included advanced language classes to communicate with foreign partners and extensive meetings with vendors to understand the intricacies of their trade. Her favorite of the training regimen were the language classes. She had grown close to her language tutor over the years—her language teacher Jojo, although old enough to be Boah's aunty had become a sort of confidante.

She used this as an excuse to stay indoors, but the real reason was that she was trying to avoid all possible chance encounters with Kwabena. On this day, after enduring hours of tedious negotiations and challenging lessons, Boahinmaa was starting to feel suffocated in the house and craved some nature. Furthermore, she had spent a long time getting ready to meet with all those vendors, she had a beautiful outfit on, and did not want to let it go to waste.

As she slipped out of the compound, Boahinmaa felt a mix of guilt and exhilaration. The air outside was fresh, carrying the earthy scent of the rain-soaked land. This in contrast to the comfort and stability of her life within the city walls was what she considered freedom. This intoxicating blend of freedom and the raw beauty of nature was what kept drawing her away from the city, sometimes to her own detriment. As she meandered through the verdant outskirts, her attention was caught by a flurry of activity in the trees above.

A group of Long-tailed Glossy Starlings, their iridescent bodies shimmering in the waning light, dance from branch to branch. These birds, with their vibrant plumage and melodious calls enchanted her. She began to follow them, her steps light, as they led her on a merry chase through the forest, their calls echoing through the air.

Eventually, the birds flew off, leaving her alone once more, and she was greeted by profound silence, perhaps the biggest reason she goes on these walks in the first place, and once again, she is left with her thoughts.

Lost in her thoughts and the beauty of her surroundings, Boahinmaa barely noticed the figure slumped against the base of an ancient baobab tree until a weak moan broke her from her trance. The sound was laden with pain and despair. On the floor, there was a trail of blood that led under the tree, where a horse was grazing, and next to it, a man laid, clutching his belly.

She cautiously began to get closer to the man, keeping her eyes peeled. He was barely conscious, his clothing was stained with the dark hue of his own blood. She spoke to the man, but he only replied with intelligible gibberish. She pulled up his ntomaa, she found a deep gash in his belly, he had been stabbed. She tried to lift him up to a sitting position, and when she pulled on his arm, she realized he was taller than she had initially anticipated. Despite his weakened state, his slender yet muscular frame was evident. With great effort, she pulled him closer to the horse, hoping to use the animal to transport him to safety. However, the horse got startled by the sudden movement and ran off into the dense foliage.

Determined to help the stranger, Boahinmaa searched her surroundings for anything that could aid in stopping the bleeding. She searched her surroundings for herbs that could help stem the bleeding. Her knowledge of the land, part of her training at the city, guided her to a patch of acheampong leaves—a merchant must know how to stem bleeding in the event of a robbery, she thought to herself. She quickly gathered a handful and pressed them against the man's wound, applying pressure to slow the flow of blood.

The man winced in pain, and despite the fact he was caught lacking, she couldn't help but notice his strong jawline, high cheekbones, and his rather large and well-defined nose. His dark hair, though matted with sweat and dirt, framed his face in a way that accentuated his rugged charm.

Offering him water from her calabash bottle, Boahinmaa gently set the man against the baobab tree. She knew she needed to find help quickly. With a promise to return, she hurried off to fetch the nearest healer.

Upon their return, they found the man had fallen unconscious, his breathing shallow. Together, they carried him to the healer's hut, a simple structure nestled in the heart of the verdant outskirts. Inside the hut, the healer assured Boah that the stranger was going to survive. As Boahinmaa prepared to leave, the healer stopped her. "Wait... I know who you are." the healer said, their voice filled with certainty.

Boahinmaa, caught off guard, replied that they must be confused. She knew who the healer was, but was certain they had never met one-on-one. But

the healer persisted, saying, "You are Ama's daughter, the one to be wed soon."

She explained that she was merely helping a stranger in need and that no one could know of her involvement. The healer, sensing the genuine concern in Boahinmaa's eyes, nodded in understanding, assuring her that her secret was safe. After she walked out, the healer followed behind, saying, "If your goal is to keep this a secret, I'm afraid, you are off to a bad start", pointing at her bloodied dress. The healer helped her get the blood out of the dress, and Boah returned home.

With a heavy heart and a mind swirling with thoughts of the handsome stranger, Boahinmaa made her way back to the compound, sneaking back into the compound as she always did. As she walked through the familiar halls, she ran across her mother again. Ama couldn't help but notice the happiness that radiated from her daughter's face, a stark contrast to the melancholy that had plagued her in recent days. She even smiled and complimented her mother's hair. Her mother muttered to herself, 'Thank the ancestors, she's finally happy.'

On her way to her room, she made a solemn vow to never return to the verdant outskirts, because of the troubles that always seemed to follow her on these journeys . First, she learned Kwabena's secret, which he might be after her life for, and now, she was almost caught alone with another man. 'What if he had died?'

However, she couldn't help but feel satisfaction. She had saved a life today, and that knowledge filled her with a sense of purpose, fulfillment.

As night fell, Boahinmaa's mind wandered to the mysterious man she had rescued. His striking features and foreign appearance consumed her thoughts, and she found herself wondering about his identity and the circumstances that had led him to such a dire state.

She had never encountered anyone like him before, and he only seemed to blabber unintelligible words when he spoke, leading her to believe that he must be a stranger to these lands. Questions swirled in her mind, and a deep curiosity took root.

## THE OMI KINGDOM

### **Vignette - Belonging**

*When the only way to find identity in a society is limited to one facet—economic participation through work, or political and military participation in the affairs of the state.*

- When socialization and community is stifled, and people are driven to a state of loneliness if they do not participate, they become even more likely to become immoral.*

