

# **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.*

---

<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 flowed gently—a winding stream that fed into the vast Niger Delta, serving as a lifeline for the rustic villages scattered along its banks.

Obodom, their village, was cradled by dense forests whose canopies filtered dappled sunlight onto narrow, muddy paths. The air hung heavy with the scent of damp earth and lush foliage, punctuated by the distant cries of birds and the rustle of unseen creatures. Life here moved like the stream itself—slow and steady—steeped in tradition and defined by close-knit relationships.

Due to its geographical seclusion, Obodom saw fewer large boats and foreign traders than other villages in the region. The community relied on the larger nearby village of Obutong to sell their produce and fish, making occasional journeys through the forest paths to reach the bustling markets.

Outsiders like Boahinmaa and Ekanem were a rarity, making integration a gradual and sometimes arduous process. As she watched her son by the stream, she couldn't help but reflect on their journey. Ekanem, a lanky boy with bright, inquisitive eyes, knelt nearby, his hands busy with the task at hand.

"This batch is very dirty," he remarked, breaking the comfortable 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. Here, in their shared solitude, they found peace—an opportunity

to both remember and forget. The people of the village were nice, but they were not kind. To them, Boah and Ekanem remained outsiders, marked by their different ways and unfamiliar past.

Boahinmaa's thoughts were interrupted as she eyed the swelling clouds with growing unease. The impending storm added urgency to their usually leisurely task. "A storm is coming, Odo, we must hurry," she said, placing the pot in the sand and joining Ekanem in washing the leaves.

The earthy scent of damp soil mingled with the sharp, green fragrance of the freshly picked leaves. As they worked, a sudden hush fell over the forest, broken only by the chirping of crickets. Boahinmaa paused, a thoughtful murmur escaping her lips, "Crickets... that is fascinating."

Ekanem glanced up at his mother as he shook water from the leaves. "What do you mean, Mama?"

"Well, they chirp differently before a storm..." Boahinmaa began softly, more to herself than to him. "Obong-ofon taught me that."

Ekanem snorted, his hands still busy with the leaves. "Like when the elders say a sneeze means the people are gossiping about you?"

Boahinmaa smiled, watching him work. Her son was skeptical of the old ways. "Not all those sayings are just superstitions, you know." she reached for another handful of leaves.

He turned to her with an exaggerated eye roll that made her laugh. "Alright, alright..." she conceded, "...some of them are silly. But even those have their purpose—like my stories."

"Oh no," he backed away, laughing. "I can already tell where this is going, Mama. No stories today."

"Who said I was going to tell you a story today?" She wrapped up the basket of Ugwu leaves, hiding her smile.

"Mama!"

"We haven't done this week's story though..." She adjusted the basket. "Remember our pact?"

"Yes, and I want to learn about our culture, but can we please skip this week?" he fussed.

Boahinmaa studied her son's face for a moment. Her own childhood echoed in her mind—years of rigid expectations and stolen freedoms, of duties performed without joy. She had decided a long time ago that she wouldn't repeat those patterns. Let him come to learn about their culture willingly, she thought, even if it meant waiting a decade.

"Oh... alright..." the disappointment in her voice was subtle but clear as she fell silent.

Ekanem watched her for a moment, recognizing her disappointment, he sighed. "Well... we did miss a few times recently." A smile crept across his face. "Maybe we can make up for that. But just one story today o," he added with a laugh.

She brightened up immediately, and he couldn't help but smile at how predictable they both were—her with her stories, him with his pretend resistance that always melted away.

Just then, something small and dark leaped into their water pot with a tiny splash.

"Ah!" they both exclaimed, peering into the pot. A cricket paddled frantically in circles.

"Poor thing," Boahinmaa murmured, carefully scooping the creature out with cupped hands. She set it gently on a broad leaf, where it sat for a moment, rubbing its legs together as if testing them. "Have I told you the story of how the cricket got its voice?"

"After the harvest festival," Ekanem replied, watching the insect spring away into the grass. Then he added unexpectedly, "I actually liked that one."

She smiled while tipping the pot to pour out the water. "Did you now?" The stream burbled as she dipped the pot back in, filling it with fresh water.

"Mhm," he mumbled, suddenly self-conscious about his enthusiasm.

"So, you enjoyed it and secretly want to hear another one, don't you" she teased, reaching over to tickle him playfully. He squirmed away, grinning. "Maybe... but first, let me help you with—" A distant rumble of thunder cut him off. They both looked up at the darkening sky.

"It's okay, my love, I have it covered" Boahinmaa said softly. He always offered, even though they both knew he couldn't help, and she always declined.

She lifted the heavy pot onto her head, adjusting it with practiced ease. The storm clouds were growing darker, and the crickets' song had taken on an urgent tone. Despite her familiarity with the path home, she secretly longed for a night free of this long necessary trek, especially with the rainy season setting in.

Ekanem watched her balance the pot, his eyes wide with wonder. "This should be a competition, Mama!" he exclaimed. "I bet I could do it too... well, maybe with a smaller pot."

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.

His enthusiasm warmed her heart. These moments by the stream were precious—here, he could simply be a child, free from the sideways glances and whispered comments that followed them in the village. Just last week, he'd come home soaked after some boys pushed him into a puddle of stagnant rainwater. When she'd asked how he felt about it, he'd simply said, "It's because they don't know us yet, Mama. When they do, they'll like us." Her little gentleman in a child's body, always trying to see the best in others.

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

As they walked, the scattered raindrops began to fall, leaving dark spots on the dusty path, releasing that familiar earthy scent. Ekanem adjusted his grip on the farm tools, glancing at his mother.

"Mama," he said suddenly, "how do you even come up with all these stories? Week after week..."

Boahinmaa smiled, watching another raindrop darken the earth. "Would you like to know?"

"Yes," he admitted

She shifted the pot slightly on her head. "Our people believe that all stories belong to Anansi, the god of stories... he is the keeper and steward of all stories." She paused thoughtfully. "But it hasn't always been that way."

"Really?" Ekanem's voice lifted with interest.

"Yes," she said. "There was a time when he was merely a cunning spider-god. That will be our story tonight... let me tell you the story of the origin of all stories..."

Thunder rumbled in the distance as Boahinmaa transformed her voice, dropping it to a mysterious deep tone that seemed to match the darkening sky. *"Now, let us weave the tale of the cunning spider king. The god of stories."*

She paused, letting the words settle. Ekanem wasn't buying the voice, but she kept up with it anyway.

*"Some say that 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—his goal, to find the custodian of stories and absorbed their power. He did and this is how 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.

The rain was beginning to fall more steadily now, and Boahinmaa adjusted her grip on the pot. When she spoke again, her voice had regained its storyteller's resonance. *"But the true tale goes like this: Anansi observed that the absence of stories wasn't a result of the non-existence of stories. Every creature he met spoke of Nyame's vast treasury of stories. The elephant told of how Nyame kept all tales of strength and memory. The parrot whispered of how he guarded every song and poem ever sung. Even the wise tortoise, ancient among mortals, claimed Nyame had collected every wisdom tale since the dawn of time."*

*"And so Anansi, hearing these whispers and claims, believed he knew the truth—that Nyame had gathered all stories to himself, keeping them like precious gems in his celestial vault."*

*"Determined to bring stories to the world, Anansi set out on a great journey. He traveled for moons upon moons. 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, but he was... simply ignored.*

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

Boahinmaa smiled at her son's insight. "Most people kill spiders," she said softly. "But we don't. They are sacred to us."

"Kill them?" Ekanem's pace slowed with his confusion. "But why? They don't hurt anyone. They even help by eating mosquitoes and flies."

His mother adjusted the pot carefully, touched by his innocent logic. "People believe different things, Odo. Not everyone sees spiders the way we do." She paused, letting the words settle. Then her voice deepened again as she returned to her tale.

*"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 had begun spending every moment from dawn to dusk in Nyame's presence, trying to get his attention. 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.

***'Twenty-one days you have dwelt in my shadow,  
Twenty-one dawns I have watched you persist,  
Twenty-one dusks saw your webs catch tomorrow,***

*'Twenty-one nights you refused to desist.'*

**"Do you not know who I am?"** Nyame's voice boomed. *"I am Nyame, the primordial god of the heavens, Odomankoma, the infinitely filled who gave to the earth out of his infinite fullness. The embodiment of the 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 in your twenty-one days here, I have watched your understanding grow hollow."*

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

**"Your persistence fascinates me... but beyond that, your misunderstanding amuses me even more, small one,"** he expressed.

*"You came seeking a treasury of hoarded stories, yet you understand not their true nature. Every tale, every whisper, every dream—I know them, not because I hoard them, but because I possess an ability that others do not—true insight. Where others see only what is, I see the truth beneath—every possibility, every perspective, every meaning that makes a moment worth telling. Nothing escapes my gaze, not even the possibilities that dance between what is and what could be."*

*Nyame leaned forward on his golden stool. "You seek what you believe I keep locked away, but I am no keeper of stories, Anansi. I am their witness. The first and only being who can truly see the deeper threads that bind all moments together. Others see a battle and count the dead. I see the courage, the fear, the hope that makes such moments worth telling."*

As Nyame's words settled on his mind, Anansi's perspective shifted, and so did what he sought. Showing a courage that belied his size—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—but not just facts. I...' he paused, '...the world below needs to share in your insight. The history of what has been, what could have been, and what could be. 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, 'but this ability is not one that can be shared willy-nilly, especially not to one who seeks such power for themselves.' he mused, 'To get what you seek, you need to prove yourself worthy of such a boon.' Nyame continued.

'I do not seek this ability for just myself,' Anansi replied. 'What I seek is to be the one to bring this insight to the world. To be the one to tell stories to the world, to 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 there is a tinge of wisdom in your words—a sign that my gift 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 ability, 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 also for illumination. The insight you hold, great Nyame, has the power to do just that.'

Boah stroked her chin and continued,

'Nyame intrigued by Anansi's wisdom replied, "You speak well, Anansi. But clever words are not enough. How do I know you will not use this power of perception for your own schemes?"'

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

'You ask again, O Odomankoma, but wisdom hoarded is wisdom 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 understanding—to be shared? That is the reason I came in the first place.'

*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 have a different discourse about that which you seek,' 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.*

"What do these tasks have to do with what he will do with the power?" Ekanem asked, snorting.

"Such are the mysteries of Nyame" she spread her arms out, "...only he knows."

"Hmm. So, how did Anansi achieve his goal?!" Ekanem asked eagerly.

"Who said he did?" his mother answered mysteriously.

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

"So, now you know how the story goes?" she jested, , "Well, come on then, let's hear your thoughts. How did Anansi capture Onini?"

"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.

"Anansi is no ordinary spider, my son. I mean, he dug a hole, remember?" Boahinmaa chuckled

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," Ekanem said, eager to continue despite the weather. "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's feet squelched in the increasingly muddy soil. She paused, watching their goat in the distance trying to find shelter from the rain.

A sigh escaped her lips. "I'm afraid I have to end our storytime here, Odø. We need to hurry home before this rain gets worse." There was a tinge of sadness in her voice, but the weather left them no choice. "I'll continue tomorrow—or maybe after we've rescued the goat and settled inside."

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 snorted as 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.

## **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.

---

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, ɔdɔ" 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 bɔ 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, ɔdɔ," 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 with 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... Odo, 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, and in some cases, an obstacle. They become something less human, replaced by the observer's view of the collective.

When a person becomes a part of a group, they are reduced to a mere cog, a sound in the midst of the roar of a crowd. They cast off their individual inhibitions to engage in collective behavior.

While sometimes harmless, a closer examination can reveal a tapestry of complex circumstances interwoven with complex decisions, bearing real consequences.

The group doesn't just change how we see others—it changes who we are. In the embrace of groups, even the most principled soul can lose itself to the fever of shared purpose. And when that purpose turns to violence... well, let's just say, I've watched good people do things they'd never dream of alone.

I've seen it countless times: a group points at its enemy—perhaps a village of innocents—and suddenly sees not people, not as individuals, but as a whole malevolent entity, a darkness to be eradicated... dehumanizing the other group. The worst rise quickly to the surface, and all they see are faceless adversaries to be eliminated. Just as they did with Boah—not a defenseless mother protecting children, not a fellow human. Just an obstacle.

But there's a curious thing that happens when an individual is isolated from the group and must face their "enemy" alone. Sometimes, the hatred holds firm, and they'll still commit those same terrible acts—finding new justifications for old cruelties. But sometimes... sometimes empathy sneaks in like a spider through a crack. Guilt and remorse takes hold really fast, and swiftly the veil is penetrated.

In that brief moment before the group reclaims them, individuality is restored, and they remember their own humanity—see it reflected in the "enemy". It takes tremendous strength to hold onto that clarity. But these lucid moments... they're precious

*chances to step back from the edge of madness, to remember who we are beneath the roar of the crowd.*

### ***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. The usually vibrant forest, aglow with bioluminescent bugs, was eerily dark tonight, as though nature itself warned of the darkness and sorrow ahead.

She could barely see a few steps in front of her. Looking down, she found the flood waters now covered her ankles, its current threatening to sweep her feet from under her. With her sight betraying her, she strained to listen for her baby's cry, but the relentless wind and rushing water drowned out all other sounds.

Desperation clawed at her chest as tears began to fall. Her baby was truly gone. She collapsed, knees first, into the water, pleading with Oya, the orisha of storms, for help—but no answer came. She was utterly helpless.

A guttural scream tore from her throat, carrying with it the weight of the wind, violently extinguishing her torch. In the sudden darkness, the wind subsided, and through the quiet, a sharp, tiny cry pierced the distance.

Abeni wiped her face with trembling hands and struggled to her feet. She ran toward the sound, fighting against the torrent, blind but determined, heedless of trees or the threat of falling.

Then the crying faded and stopped. She froze, straining to hear it again—but instead, pandemonium erupted from the direction of the village. Something was wrong back home. Perhaps the guards had discovered her escape and were searching for her.

As she stood there, paralyzed between two dangers, she felt warm liquid flowing down her thighs. Her fingers came away wet with thick blood—she was still bleeding from childbirth. Her head began to ring, and she realized she was lost, with no light and no clear path forward.

But she couldn't stop now, couldn't go back. She pressed onward, desperate to find where the crying had come from. As she progressed, the forest floor began to slope downward, and there, like the mouth of some great beast, a cave opening appeared. Inside, a dim glow flickered—fireflies perhaps, offering a minor break in the darkness.

With no other sign of where the crying had originated, she moved toward the light. Above, the clouds began to part, revealing an almost full moon that might have illuminated the forest had the storm not continued its assault. In the new, weak light, she discovered not one cave but two. She looked around—nothing but flood-covered ground and endless forest as far as she could see. The only way forward was into the caves.

As she made her way to the first cave, hope flickered briefly—perhaps the chief had shown mercy, placing the baby in the cave on higher ground. But she knew better. The rumors she had heard suggested that ritual required the baby be left in the forest itself, not sheltered in a cave.

She followed the incline, each step a battle. She had lost even more blood now, her legs heavy as stone, but determination drove her forward until she reached the first cave. Though small, it was surprisingly welcoming. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like frozen tears, fireflies clinging to them and casting a ghostly glow. The walls shimmered with moisture despite their roughness, patches of moss and fern adding whispers of life to the stone.

The air was damp and earthy, the cave unexpectedly warm—it would have made perfect shelter from the storm under better circumstances. But there was nothing here beyond a few bats and clinging fauna. As she turned to leave, something caught her eye in the faint moonlight—a silhouette in the rushing water below.

Her heart lept. She tried to dash forward, but her legs betrayed her, dizziness clouding her vision. She had lost too much blood. But she hadn't come this far to give up on her baby. Slowly, carefully, she began to crawl down the incline, watching the silhouette being carried by the current toward the lower cave. As she

reached the cave's mouth, the rising water forced her to her feet once more.

She inched forward into the darkness until her foot suddenly plunged into a shallow pool, the water swallowing her leg up to her knee. This had to be the cave entrance. Unlike its sister above, this cave was darker, slightly colder, with no friendly fireflies to light the way.

She began flailing her hands in the darkness, desperate to find either her baby or something to hold onto. Then, piercing the gloom, came the crying again. Relief flooded through her—all night her hope had been slipping away.

But as she made her way towards the noise, the water level rose, higher and higher around her body. Then suddenly—her leg dropped! With a sharp gasp, she plunged into an even deeper pool, her foot striking hard against a submerged rock. She barely felt the impact; her body was becoming numb to it all.

The baby's crying transformed into desperate choking and coughing sounds—the child was starting to drown. This cave clearly ran deeper than the first, its depths unknown. If she ventured too far, she could drown herself, leaving her child at home to lose both its twin and its mother.

"Aye mi!" (My life!) she cried out, her voice echoing off the cave walls. "Ki mo f'omo kan d'ipo ikeji. Olodumare?!" (Am I to sacrifice one child for the other, oh God?!) Her stomach sank as the choking sounds slowly ceased, leaving only the sound of rushing water filling the cave.

She waded further, hands searching blindly until they found something solid. Her heart leaped—but it was only a piece of tree bark. Still, she was getting closer. Among the debris floating in the dark water, her fingers finally brushed against fabric. The baby's bassinet! She reached in and grabbed the child, but the tiny body was still, no breath stirring.

Immediately, she began fighting her way back out of the cave. She returned back to the upper cave, where she began trying desperately to revive the baby, but no life returned to the small form.

Her wail of anguish echoed through the cave, so raw and powerful it sent bats fleeing into the night. Exhausted, broken, and utterly alone, she felt her legs finally give out. As consciousness began to slip away, she held the baby close to her chest, her tears mixing with the rain water.

The fireflies gathered around the mother and child, their gentle light forming a silent vigil. Like stars fallen to earth, they illuminated her tears, her still form, the tiny bundle in her arms—bearing witness to a grief too deep for the night to swallow.

Something had changed in that cave—the fireflies never left, their light a constant reminder of that night. Years passed, and while the forest forgot the storm, the cave remembered. It holds that memory still, to this day—in its damp air, in its whispering walls, and in the fireflies that glow like eternal tears. Those who enter feel it instantly: the weight of that heavy sadness, as heavy and real as the day it was born.

## ***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.

"*Omō 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.

Just before crossing into the village, her heart seized at the sight ahead—Boro's lifeless body sprawled on the ground. Surrounding him were the corpses of seven raiders, each felled by his hand. Their uniforms were unmistakable: soldiers of Omi. Her breath quickened, she could feel her pulse pounding all through her body. The village wasn't safe.

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:

*"Òrúnmìlà, àlàáfíà àti ìmólè,  
Fún mi ní àgbára láti gba èmí paddà,  
Kí àwọn tí ó ti lọ lè padà wá láàyè,  
Jé kí èmí àwọn ọmọ mi dídé léèkan sii."*

Translation:

"Orunmila, Orisha 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, ḥòrìṣà orita,  
Ní ìbí tí ìgbé àti ikú pàdé,  
Fun awon omo wanyii ni itosona pada wa si mi  
Mu wan pada si igbesi aye."*

Translation:

*"Èṣù Láàlú, the Orisha 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.

The air was thick with tension, but nothing happened. Abeni knelt before the altar, her voice barely above a whisper as she prayed to Kori, the Orisha of children, and Oshun and Iyemoja, the Orishas of childbirth and fertility. Still, her pleas went unanswered.

Determined, she took a deep breath and began to draw upon deeper, more primal forces. Her hands moved in intricate patterns, weaving spells she had only heard of in whispers. Yet, all her efforts led to silence.

"Ah, just like last night, the Orishas will surely answer," she told herself, a mix of hope and desperation in her voice. "I just have to be patient."

But as hours passed and her prayers remained unanswered, her resolve started to wane. The weight of her loss and the horrors of the day crashed down upon her. In a surge of rage and despair, she tore down the altar, her anguished cries echoing through the cave.

"Ikunle abiyamo o!" The ancient cry of laboring mothers tore from her throat, though her own children lay cold in her arms. Abeni's tears fell onto their still faces as a memory surfaced—dark and forbidden. Years ago in Uwuro, she had witnessed

a witch restore life to a dying prince, only to be summarily executed shortly after. Though the full price of such magic remained unknown to her, Abeni had learned well that every ritual demanded its due. Yet as she cradled her lifeless children, such warnings seemed distant echoes against the howl of her grief. Some prices, she decided, were worth paying, some consequences were worth bearing, no matter how dire.

"My children," she whispered to them, "I will bring you back, no matter the cost."

With shaking hands, she began the forbidden ritual. The air in the cave grew heavy, charged with an unsettling energy. As she chanted ancient words, each syllable seemed to draw power from the very stones around her.

As the ritual reached its peak, a searing pain tore through her chest. It felt as if her very soul was being ripped apart. She gasped, vision blurring, but pushed herself to continue.

"Unite me with my children!" she cried out, her voice breaking.

For a moment, there was only silence. Then, she felt a faint movement against her chest—a tiny limb twitching, a soft, fragile breath. A weak cry pierced the quiet.

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

Joy flooded her, but it was fleeting. As her babies stirred to life, she felt her own strength slipping away. Her vision darkened, limbs growing heavy.

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

Her arms fell limply to her sides, as she gently laid the now-breathing infants on the cave floor. The air grew thick with the metallic tang of blood and something else—a cloying sweetness that seemed to coat the back of her throat. She observed the damp cave ceilings begin to pulsate, then, her eyelids slowly shut.

In the deepest shadows of the cave, darkness pooled unnaturally, as if the blackness itself had weight and substance. The boundaries between worlds had grown thin.

Just then, a shadow fell across the entrance. A tall, slender man stood there, silhouetted by the rising moon. He held a ceremonial staff adorned with cowrie shells and bones, symbols of his authority as the village's Chief Priest.

His eyes widened as he took in the scene—the infants, the altar, the oppressive air. He stumbled backward, nearly falling as he collided with the cave wall. The staff slipped from his grasp, landing with a hollow thud that echoed through the cavern.

"*Abasi mi!*" (My God!) he cried out, "The spirits will curse us all for this!"

He moved forward cautiously, kneeling beside Abeni, his traditional robes rustling against the cave floor. In the distance, an owl's cry cut through the night—a sound that made him flinch visibly. "A-Abeni?" he whispered, voice trembling.

With shaking fingers, he reached out to touch her hand, then recoiled as if burned. The skin where he'd touched her felt wrong—too cold, yet somehow burning. "Abeni?" he called softly, hope and dread entwined in his tone.

Her eyelids fluttered open, eyes bloodshot and unfocused. "You..." she rasped, recognition and anger flickering in her gaze. "Why? Why my ch-children?"

The priest swallowed hard, his hands trembling. "Abeni, I..." He faltered, words failing him.

"Speak! Abeni commanded, her voice weak but sharp. "Or have the gods finally struck you dumb." The priest was still too dumbfounded to respond.

"Look at me, at what your cowardice has cost." she continued

He finally spoke, "This... this is impossible. The children died... I watched you... carry them with you from the village" he faced the direction of the village, trying to process the sequence of events.

The priest's eyes darted to the infants, a mix of fear and wonder on his face, "They... they breathe... they cry... they live again." he leaned in for a closer look, and that was when he saw it.

The markings on the ground still smoking faintly, the offerings now turned black

and putrid. He did not recognize what kind of ritual this was, but it was terrifying, and his face wore the horror he felt. "How... what have you done?

"What have I done?" Abeni's laugh was bitter, ending in a wet cough. "I've undone what you started when you stole my child. When you left us defenseless." Her eyes burned with accusation. "Tell me, did you pray for our safety as you carried my baby into the forest? Did you make offerings while the soldiers burned our homes?"

"I never meant—" he began, but she cut him off.

"Never meant what? To tear apart a family? To leave us to die?" she clawed at him weakly.

"You followed me here, watching, hiding like a coward. Just as you hid when the village needed you."

"I did not abandon—" he lashed out, then caught himself, "I returned, but it was too late... I was too late." he diverted his gaze to the floor.

His shoulders sagged under the weight of her words. "The omens... the signs... They all pointed to... I tried... I was trying to protect everyone", he broke down.

"Protect?" Abeni's voice cracked. "Look around you!—" she coughed up some blood, "What did you protect? The child died... the village was destroyed, everybody died!"

Silence fell between them, heavy and suffocating, only punctuated by the echos of the babies' cries.

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 were the one who took her into the forest in the first place," Abeni said, her voice, despite softening, was tinged with pain.

"If I had returned..." the priest trailed off, a tear rolled down his cheek. "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, an uncomfortable truth that seemed to mock them both. The priest's head dropped, chin brushing his against his clavicles as he shook his head.

"I regret ever becoming the Chief Priest," he sighed heavily. "I don't think I've ever said that to anyone before. We accept the responsibilities thrust upon us—how could I say no to guiding and protecting the people? Besides, I lack other skills; I cannot farm, nor can I fish." He paused. "I'm sorry. My explanations mean nothing—for the pain I've caused you. I am truly sorry."

Silence settled between them again.

"You remind me of the people from my hometown," Abeni said softly. "So afraid of breaking customs that they miss the irony of causing harm in the name of tradition."

"Perhaps... perhaps it was meant to be this way," the priest replied uncertainly.

Abeni's laugh turned into a cough; she spat blood. "Meant to be? How was all this suffering, all this death 'meant to be'?" Her voice rose with fury, and a gust of wind swept through the cave. "They burned our homes, slaughtered our people like animals. They didn't even spare the children who ran..."

"Then they moved on to the next town," the priest added, shame weighing his words.

The air thickened around them, the cave walls seeming to close in. Shadows writhed in the corners.

"The soldiers think they can wash the blood from their hands, ravage our lands, cause all this pain and sorrow with no price to pay," Abeni said, her eyes gleaming unnaturally in the dim light. "But the earth remembers. The soil drinks deep of every crime."

Her voice took on an otherworldly resonance that made the priest's bones ache. "Let them know no peace. Let the very ground rise against them, turn their minds against themselves. They who showed no mercy shall become prisoners of their

own flesh, their own hands their enemies."

Okeghene felt a chill run down his spine. In all the years he'd known her, he'd never imagined Abeni capable of such power. Though the curse frightened him, part of him felt grim satisfaction knowing the soldiers would pay.

He stepped forward hesitantly. "Let me help you," he said softly. "We can go to Obutong together. Perhaps there's still time to heal you."

Abeni shook her head slowly. "No, Okeghene. This is where my path ends."

"You don't have to face this alone," he pleaded, his eyes searching hers. "Please, let me carry you back. The healers in Obutong might—"

"It's too late," she interrupted, gaze distant. "My fate was sealed the moment I chose to bring them back." She glanced at her children, a faint smile touching her lips. "I gave what remained of me to them."

She met his eyes, a mix of sorrow and resolve in her own. "Your apologies change nothing. The time for action has long passed."

He opened his mouth but found no words. He sank to his knees beside her. "Tell me how to make this right," he whispered. "Please. I need to atone."

Abeni's expression softened slightly. "Some things cannot be undone. You must live with that, as I have."

"I've carried this burden for so long," he said, shoulders slumping. "Every child, every life lost because of my failures weighs on me. If I have to carry any more, I fear I'll sink into the earth itself."

"And I carry the weight of my choices now," Abeni murmured, her strength fading. The priest spoke again, but she could no longer make out his words.

As she listened to his muffled voice, each breath a struggle, her thoughts drifted to her twin sister, Abebi—their last embrace, the unspoken words in their final goodbye. Her sister's last words echoed in her mind: "Remember the moon."

"The children," Abeni whispered, her voice barely audible. "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. Tell the girls about the moon... so that I may live on in their hearts, every night."

Okeghene nodded, tears brimming in his eyes. "I will, Abeni. I promise."

A faint, sad smile touched Abeni's lips. "Then perhaps there's hope for you yet." Her eyes began to close as she murmured softly, her words fading into whispers. "...the moon... it guides us all... we must keep looking up... Iya Ibeji said we must not go near the water, Abebi... wait..."

A single tear rolled down her temple, glowing with an otherworldly light. The cave floor drank it in, and something dark and delicate pushed through the earth. 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.

As her eyes closed for the final time, memories flooded her mind. She saw herself and her twin sister, Abebi, as children running beneath the moonlit sky, their laughter echoing through the night. Hand in hand, they danced, the moonlight embracing them.

"Abebi, do you feel it, do you hear it?" young Abeni exclaimed, eyes wide with wonder. "The moon, the water—it sings to us!"

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 scene shifted. They stood waist-deep in the sacred river as young women, hands raised toward the full moon. Its light turned the water to liquid silver.

"Remember, Abeni," Abebi's voice echoed gently, "as long as we remember the truth about the moon, we will never truly be apart."

A genuine smile formed on Abeni's lips. In her final moments, she felt the truth of

her sister's words. Though separated by distance, their bond transcended the physical world.

Another memory surfaced: returning from the river at dawn, only to see their mother's body being carried from their home. The weight of their loss crushed them, their wails piercing the morning air.

That memory faded into another. She was in the embrace of a hunter, his voice a soft whisper in her ear. "My next life will be incomplete if I do not find you again in it." A profound sense of peace washed over her.

Her hand slipped from Okeghene's grasp. In that moment, a thunderous noise echoed through the cave. The ground trembled, and a fierce wind howled from its depths. Okeghene hunched over the babies, shielding them from the supernatural gale.

When the wind subsided and the earth grew still, he looked up to find Abeni lying peacefully in death. The infants cried, their voices a poignant reminder of life given and life lost.

Overwhelmed by grief, Okeghene collapsed beside her body, his sobs filling the cavern.

After a time, he gathered the infants in his arms, the weight of his actions and new responsibility heavy upon him.

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

*"Ka fo odu ke ikpaisong mfo, Abeni,"* [.? Confirm phrase meaning]

## **An Adamant Soul**

The chief priest laid her to rest in the cave beside the enigmatic black flower, then gathered the babies in his arms, their weight mingling with his burden of shame and sorrow. As he turned toward the village, the familiar path twisted, splitting into an unexpected fork.

Confusion gripped him. '*Perhaps I've missed the path home,*' he thought, turning to retrace his steps. Horror seized him as he found the road behind had vanished, replaced by an impenetrable wall of ancient trees. Fear slithered down his spine.

When he turned back, the fork too had disappeared. A small hand pressed against his back, and he recoiled. Behind him stood a little boy, blood seeping from his eyes, ears, and nose.

The priest's shriek pierced the air as he stumbled backward until rough bark met his spine. The babies, startled awake, began to wail. He glanced down at their tiny forms, and when he raised his eyes again, the forest had returned to normal—the boy gone, the familiar path restored.

For the remainder of his journey, his gaze never left the path, dreading that a moment's distraction might thrust him back into that terrifying otherworld.

The sight at the village's edge shattered what little composure remained. His once-vibrant community lay in ruins, a testament to unspoken horrors. Overwhelmed, he lashed out at the gods, his voice rising from incoherent cries to anguished demands.

"Why have you forsaken us? What have we done to deserve such wrath?" His words echoed through the devastated village, bouncing off charred remnants of homes that once held laughter and life. The answering silence cut deeper than any divine punishment.

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

At the village center, he placed the babies on a bed of gathered leaves. Sinking to his knees, his fingers 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?" His hoarse voice carried the question skyward, met only with silence.

Behind his house, he retrieved tools and began to dig. Each strike into the soil marked another life lost. As he worked, doubt crept into the deepening hole, whispering questions into his heart—had the twins truly brought misfortune, 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. The moon stared back at his upturned face, indifferent to his predicament.

"But her gods... they listened to her, even defying death on her behalf, while our gods abandoned us." His gaze followed the moonlight as it illuminated the village ruins.

With an uncertain heart, he continued his penance, digging by moonlight until clouds obscured its guidance. Taking wood from a burned house, he fashioned a torch and worked until dawn's first light pierced the dark clouds, revealing a grave large enough to hold many of the dead.

As he placed the first body in the grave, the chief priest began the funeral rites, but the opening words caught in his throat. He collapsed to his knees, overwhelmed not just by the loss of his people, but by the shattering of his faith. The sacred words rang hollow, the rites empty vessels stripped of meaning.

One by one, he carried the dead to their final rest, preparing each body as best he could. He removed their armor, charms, jewelry, and amulets—symbols of protection that had failed them. Traditional bathing proved impossible for the charred remains, and proper burial clothes were lost to the destruction. All he could offer now were apologies, whispered to each soul as he laid them in the earth.

Dawn brought the hungry cries of the twins. Uncertain how to care for such young

infants, he gathered them up and searched the ravaged village for food. As he walked, he witnessed firsthand the horrors Ekanem and Abeni had faced in nights past, tears flowing freely at the devastation. Yet his grim work remained unfinished—many still waited for burial.

His search led him to a surviving hut where he found raw millet pap. He kindled a fire and prepared the meal as the sun climbed higher, its harsh heat beating down upon the village. In the hut's meager shade, he struggled to feed the resistant twins until hunger finally overcame their protests.

With the babies fed and sleeping, exhaustion crashed over him, yet rest proved elusive. His eyes traced the thatch ceiling, finding no peace—for there was no rest for the wicked.

Weary but restless, he returned to his labor, digging graves beneath the merciless sun. He ventured into the forest where he had felled four attackers, determined to bury them too.

*'I was fortunate to encounter only their patrol. Had I arrived earlier, I would have joined the dead,'* he reflected, lowering the second soldier into the earth.

The final body belonged to his fiercest opponent. As he prepared the grave, memories of their brutal fight surged back. They had been evenly matched, their battle dragging on until exhaustion left them barely standing, both panting in the darkness.

In that moment of mutual weakness, the priest had chosen dishonor. Catching his breath, he seized a large rock and charged, crushing the man's skull before he could react. Believing victory his, he turned away—but the dying soldier lunged forward with unexpected strength, landing a devastating blow that sent the priest spiraling into unconsciousness.

He awoke to dawn's first light filtering through the trees, the soldier lying dead beside him in a dark pool of blood. Gathering his belongings, he had stumbled away, body aching and mind clouded, soon encountering Abeni making her way back into the forest.

By nightfall, he had buried every villager claimed in the attack. Yet a disturbing realization struck him—apart from his four kills, no enemy bodies lay among the dead. He searched each blood-soaked battlefield but found only fallen defenders. Perhaps the invaders had carried away their dead.

In one hut, he discovered a basket large enough for the twins. Gathering the infants, he ventured toward the nearby farms in search of food. The first yielded only yams and cocoyams, their ripeness uncertain to his inexperienced eye. Exhausted and hungry, he pressed on to the next farm.

There he found two pawpaw trees and scattered plantains alongside a small vegetable plot. Most ripe fruit had been recently harvested, but using a discarded pole, he managed to knock down two barely-ripe pawpaws and cut a hand of plantains before returning to the village.

He boiled the plantains and mashed the pawpaws into paste. Though the twins resisted, he coaxed enough food into their mouths to quiet their hunger. Finally, he hung a mat over a hut's doorpost and laid the infants on a wooden bench, covering them with a wrapper. Stretching out on the mat, he found, at last, a moment's peace—his first rest in days.

## **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. The first of which shows how the evolution of beliefs—the right ones can transform a society and the wrong ones can shape the end of entire civilizations.*

## Lore Notes - Ijabare

// Before we proceed with the story, it's important to understand that the raiders who attacked Obodom were not mere random marauders. To grasp who they truly are, I need to tell you about Emperor Ijabare.

The Omi Kingdom, once a relentless warring nation, experienced a dramatic transformation upon the ascension of young Emperor Ijabare. In this society, few men lived to see old age, as strength was revered above all else, with the exception of wisdom—especially when both were found together.

Ijabare was born to a slave mother, whom his father, the king, executed shortly after his birth. In his youth, Ijabare led a victorious campaign against the Kingdom of Kokomori, a vibrant trading hub. Kokomori's King had insulted the Omi King, calling him an intellectually stunted brute and scorning the Omi as a society of chimpanzees. After the successful conquest, Ijabare spent time in the Kingdom, haunted by the King's words as he realized they held some truth. His time in Kokomori brought not just a new perspective, but the truth—while his mother was captured somewhere else, her roots were found deep in Kokomori.

Upon returning home, Ijabare brought many goods, artisans, craftsmen, slaves, and more. He pledged all the goods to the Kingdom but requested that the intellectuals, artisans, and musicians reside with him. The King agreed. Ijabare also requested a small piece of land in the marshes, which his father found strange. The prince claimed that the gods had shown him a vision that has prompted him to stay in the marshes—this vision was corroborated by a priest. The King granted this request.

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, artisans displayed their crafts, and musicians played music blending traditional styles with foreign influences, using

*instruments like the Shekere (percussion) and Kora (stringed). 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 exposed them to foreign ideas, inquired about their views of the world, learning their perspectives, secrets, and knowledge gained from their own campaigns. These guests departed 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. He predicted an eclipse and 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 to train an elite force for the Kingdom, to which his father agreed. 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 cavalrymen.*

*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. Ijabare 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 who dared enter were dispelled by the 100 archers, sometimes shot in the leg and left as food for the hippos 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 a 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 vassals there to either rule or establish commerce. In the ranks of the generals and vassals, he had many spies, and he executed 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.*

*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. After months of conquest, they were here. Braaka and his men raided Okpo, while Jorobu and his men made their way to the forests on the fringes of Oritameje.*

---

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

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

## ***On the Brink***

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 diminishes. 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 sick. ~~This 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***

Ajanaku's shadow stretched long against the ground as he stood before his hut, his imposing frame—six feet and six inches of hardened warrior—seeming to shrink under the weight of his thoughts. Men called him Ajanaku, the elephant, not just for his size but for his wisdom. As Balogun, he had earned his position through more than mere strength; his judgment had guided armies, saved lives, won battles where others saw only defeat.

But now, his legendary decisiveness failed him. The mantle of Balogun hung heavy on his shoulders as he stood frozen between duty and love, between the village that needed its war chief and the family that needed its protector.

His mind kept returning to his recent failure—the young scout he'd championed, now condemned for murder. That mistake gnawed at him, making him question every decision that had led to this moment.

The doorpost before him might as well have been the boundary between two worlds. On one side lay his duty as Balogun, his men waiting for his command. On the other, Abebi lay vulnerable, their unborn child choosing this of all moments to announce its arrival. His wife was a warrior in her own right—he'd seen her fell men with her bow while perched in trees during past raids—but now she needed him in a way she never had before.

"Ajanaku?" Abebi's voice drifted through the palm fronds, soft but strong despite her pain. "Is that you, my love?"

He parted the fronds, ducking his head to enter. The familiar scent of herbs and palm oil filled the space, mixing with the metallic tang of war preparations that clung to his clothes. "Yes, it's me."

"What news?" She lay on the reed mat, her hands cradling her swollen belly, but her eyes were sharp as ever, reading his face as she had read enemy movements in better days.

"They are upon us, Abebi," he said, kneeling beside her and taking her calloused hands in his. "We have mere moments."

"I've been telling the council, we need to move into the mountains. Mounting a defense from there... Ahhh!" he broke off with a sharp intake of breath as a contraction seized her..

"I know." He squeezed her hands gently, watching her face as the pain subsided. "The people could rain stones upon them from above, but..." He managed a smile. "The court elders are set in their ways. We'll raise it again in the next council meeting."

"What you need to focus on for now is the baby. Leave defending the city to me," he said, drawing her into his embrace. She melted into his arms, allowing herself this moment of comfort. His presence had always been her sanctuary, but she knew the village needed that strength now more than she did.

"Go protect the city," she whispered, gently pulling away. "I will focus on our baby." She closed her eyes, squeezing his hand one final time, drawing strength from his touch.

When she opened her eyes, Ogundele stood in the doorway, his presence a reminder of the approaching danger. He bowed deeply, his words heavy with urgency: "Asiko ti to."

Abebi caught Ajanaku's questioning glance, his eyes seeking final permission to leave. She nodded, her voice steady despite her heart's trembling. "They need you."

As Ajanaku rose, his decision no longer felt like a choice between duty and love, but rather two forms of the same protection. Yet even as certainty filled him, an undercurrent of doubt remained. As he departed, Abebi caught his hand, pressing her protection amulet into his palm.

He looked down at the amulet, shaking his head with gentle firmness. "You know I cannot take this. I cannot leave my family unprotected while I seek safety on the battlefield." His voice softened. "This is not my first battle. I will be fine." He returned the charm to her hand, closing her fingers around it. "I will return to you—that is my promise."

Then he was gone, leaving only the whisper of palm fronds in his wake.

The first wave of attackers came with the wind, and with them came Abebi's labor pains. As contractions gripped her body with increasing intensity, fear washed over her like cold rain. Ajanaku's absence felt like a physical wound, and the possibility that these might be their final moments hung heavy in the air.

Through tears and pain, she began to sing, her voice rising and falling with each contraction, welcoming her child into a world balanced between love and war:

*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).*

The air in the hut shifted as the newborn's first cry pierced the air, a joyful presence entering the world amidst the chaos of battle. Ogundele, the stationed soldier, immediately abandoned his post, racing towards the battlefield to deliver the news to General Ajanaku.

On the outskirts of the village, the clash of steel and cries of men echoed through the forest. The attackers mounted a well-coordinated assault, attacking in waves to wear down the defenders while attempting to lure them into the treacherous forest. But the village forces held firm, their defensive strategy proving effective as each wave of attackers grew smaller.

From his command tent, Balogun Ajanaku orchestrated the defense with meticulous precision. His innovative formation, devised alongside his wife, consisted of four-man units: a large shield bearer, an archer, and two versatile infantrymen capable of switching roles seamlessly. This adaptable structure formed a formidable defense line.

Across the battlefield, Jorobu, the enemy commander, quickly recognized the effectiveness of Ajanaku's strategy. With a cunning gleam in his eye, he adjusted his tactics. Instead of direct confrontation, Jorobu dispatched agile squads to harass Ajanaku's formations, peppering arrows at the shield bearers' feet. Meanwhile, he maneuvered the bulk of his forces through the dense forest, aiming for a covert assault on the village itself.

This strategic ploy forced the defenders to divide their attention. As part of their forces pursued the enemy through the woods, their carefully maintained formations began to falter. Ajanaku, sensing the shift in battle, began to arm himself, prepared to join the fray.

It was at this moment that Ogundele burst into the camp, his face flushed with exertion and excitement. Ajanaku's heart sank, fearing the worst.

"Was there an ambush? What went wrong?!" Ajanaku's voice boomed across the camp.

"It's a boy!" Ogundele exclaimed, his words tumbling out between heavy breaths.

Relief warred with frustration on Ajanaku's face. In a swift, he slapped Ogundele across the cheek. "And why would you abandon your post for this?!" he thundered, his voice cutting through the din of battle.

Regaining his composure, Ajanaku turned to Chief Olugbade, a man with whom he shared a complex, tension-filled relationship. Despite their differences, Olugbade's experience was unmatched on the battlefield.

"Olugbade," Ajanaku called with urgency, "I need you to take command here. The enemy is infiltrating the village. I must check on my family."

Their relationship was wrought with tension, but Ajanaku was desperate. But Ajanaku also recognized that of all the people on that battlefield, he had the most experience and mettle to pull the plans off. He informed Olugbade of the new battle plan.

Ajanaku sprinted towards the village, cutting down all invaders in his path, his sword flashing in the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees.

Unbeknownst to Ajanaku, General Jorobu observed his retreat from the shadows of the underbrush. A cold smile played on Jorobu's lips as he muttered, "If I take out the General, this battle ends with him." Jorobu eliminated the squads guarding the village's perimeter with stealth and followed Ajanaku, melting into the foliage like a predator stalking its prey.

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 assisising 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 a 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 ati idan.*

*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, may Ogun grant you creativity and drive, and may Sango strength and an affinity for the occult.*

*In all your days, may you never misstep or follow the wrong path in the road, for I implore Esu, the guardian of crossroads 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 ones whose births came **during** the war).*

As Ajanaku prayed, a movement caught Abebi's eyes. Jorobu, still alive, despite his grievous wound, picked up the wooden horse that had fallen from his person when he collapsed.

The horse reminded him of his son, and he called out, "Mio komola! mamuse me", (My son! I am sorry), his fingers tracing the intricate carvings on the horse. He clutched the horse and a tear ran down his cheek, but they did not understand what he was saying. He stretched out his hand, reaching out to Ajanaku, 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."

Abebi 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—too 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 Abebi to grasp his arm tightly, as if her grip alone could anchor him to this world.

Ajanaku lifted his gaze, striving to meet Abebi'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 Abebi. 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. Ajanaku's absence feeling like a wound was now permanent. 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 yé 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 àdire 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

## ***Beleku - A Desperate Flight***

Beleku ran as fast as his legs could carry him, his natural speed serving him well in this moment of desperation. "It's not every day a man slated to die gets the chance to escape," he said, voice struggling to rise above his heavy breathing.

He was determined to put as much distance between himself and the village as possible. His mind raced at the same pace as his legs, questions stumbling over each other: "What if they send guards? What if I'm captured by the enemy? Why did they let me go?"

A faint, mournful cry echoed in the distance, sending a shiver down Beleku's spine. '*What was that?*' he muttered, the sound pulling his attention away from the path ahead. '*Are they here too?*'

The distraction proved costly—a sudden, dull pain shot through his right foot as something sharp pierced his flesh. He wanted to stop, but survival left no time for pause.

As he ran, the pain slowly intensified, forcing him to look down. His eyes caught the alarming sight of blood gushing from his foot. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder. No pursuers—but the trail of crimson droplets marking his path made his stomach sink. "Oh. That's a problem," he said, his voice tight. "Might as well paint arrows for them to follow."

Only when certain no one was in sight did he sink onto a nearby rock. *I need to stop the bleeding... I cannot leave a trail*, he thought, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

This marked his second major injury in mere days, adding to the collection of bruises and cuts that already marked his skin. The fever had barely broken, and now this.

With trembling fingers, he reached for the left seam of his àdîre, tearing a strip from the fabric. He wrapped it tightly around the wound, constricting the blood vessels to slow the bleeding.

The forest around him, usually so familiar, now seemed alien. His desperate flight had taken him far from his usual hunting and scouting paths—he'd deliberately chosen random directions, darting through the densest brush to confuse any trackers. Still, paranoia gripped him. '*Should anyone... or anything try to follow me,*' he muttered, '*they need to get lost.*'

His eyes scanned the undergrowth for Imí Èṣù (Billygoat weed), but found none. With no choice, he tore another strip from his àdìre to reinforce the makeshift bandage. Rising carefully, he tested his injured foot, gradually shifting his weight onto it. Walking proved possible, but running was now impossible.

He pressed on through the forest until even walking became a struggle. Deepening shadows obscured the forest floor as he searched for a suitable branch to use as a walking stick. Though he found one, he needed more. A fire was out of the question—it would draw the attention of village hunters, enemy soldiers, or worse, the forest's wild inhabitants. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as his mind flashed back to the horror he'd witnessed just days before. '*I hope I never see them again,*' he thought, eyes darting through the shadows. Just then, something caught his eye.

A huge tree with dense foliage stood in the distance—nature's shelter that might shield him from both elements and threats, human or beast. But as he approached, the reality of his injury became clear: climbing would be nearly impossible.

Time was running short as darkness crept in. He needed to find a climbable tree before night fell completely. After some searching, he spotted an Iroko tree towering above the others. '*I would be mad to try climbing that,*' he thought, and instead turned his attention to another huge tree, although, smaller than the first, its trunk wrapped in thick vines that might make climbing easier.

With his remaining strength, he hauled himself up the vines. The pain in his foot had dulled to an ache, but a new sensation—a burning that pulsed with each heartbeat—took its place.

For the first time that day, he felt a moment of peace, finally resting on one of the tree's boughs. Around him, crickets chirped and leaves rustled in the calm breeze.

Despite his exhaustion, sleep proved elusive as every sound in the darkness below made him tense. That night he heard the eerie mournful cry again—sending shivers down his spine, he wandered if it was the same things he had encountered the day before his arrest.

He spent most of the next day clinging to his perch, torn between the need to flee further and the hope that rest might strengthen his injured foot. Fear had kept him up here too—fear of capture, yes, but also of what lurked in the forest below.

As the hours passed, the wound grew increasingly hot and tender. By late afternoon, he could feel fever building in his blood, making the branches seem to sway even when the air was still.

His stomach cramped with hunger, and each throb of his foot sent waves of nausea through him. The shadows beneath the canopy seemed to deepen alongside the fever with each passing hour, and now, as another night approached, he realized he was getting weak and unstable on the tree.

"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 àdire covering his foot. The fabric was stiff with darkened blood, and unnaturally warm to the touch.

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, the movement making his vision swim.

His mind kept replaying the events leading to his imprisonment. The misery of his situation overtook him as the fever and exhaustion slowly dragged him into a dreamy state, and finally, he drifted off to sleep.

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

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

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 Araba (silk cotton) 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)***

Ekanem stood before the majestic Araba tree (onyā-hene 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 onyā-hene tree is more than just a tree. It's a bridge between our world and the realm of spirits. Avoid people that sit around onyā-hene 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. He snorted, finding some relief.

*'The land of the spirits,'* he thought to himself. *'Maybe I can find mama there... I can journey like Anansi. I just have to avoid anyone sitting near the tree.'* he contemplated as he walked around the tree, hoping to see nobody.

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 bɔ 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, kyerε me kwan na bɔ 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, and massive horns. It had the body of a large chimpanzee.

"Sasabonsam," Ekanem yelled 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, the trees had begun transforming into buildings. He began 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 feeling a sharp tug from beneath his feet.

The world tilted, and there 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?" the disembodied voice questioned—the voice was strangely high-pitched, like that of a child.

The 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 in a circle 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 grabbed the amulet out of the air and examined it, 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? What is that?" 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 set of neatly folded garments that had appeared in the corner, next to them, a small sac. With trembling hands, Ekanem gathered them up, tucking them into the sac alongside the Eko, then, the sac, under his arm.

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***

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 Araba 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 moved 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.

"I..." 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—once you disturb that chicken—it will continue to hunt you and alert the owner of your location every it finds you within the forest. And that chicken combs

the entire forest 200 times a day. 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 began again outside. It was 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, and at some point, her ears began to bleed, and after 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 those who wander into her abode 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 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 begun 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's dream 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. I vowed that when I return there, I would not leave till I could find a way to see my mother alive again."

"But after what I've seen with Urona, I don't know if I want that anymore. I would hate for my mother to become 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." he said, sniffling.

"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. Even though 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 retaliated upon hearing him say that. Both Ekanem and the chicken were startled, but the chicken shrugged it and continued to feed. She caught herself and apologized, "I'm sorry, my child. I am not hurting her."

"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."

Ekanem 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, so, even if she's not hurting, you are," 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 onto a wooden stool.

Then, there was 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 sniffled with a forming smile, "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 feeling honored, 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 Ekanem's uneasiness and turned to him, "No need to fret, I do not plan on dying today." Then she laughed loudly and nervously. This did little to comfort Ekanem, but he pretended to be relieved.

They spent the next hour gathering what was needed. First, she broke a gourd on the floor, it contained a mixture that smelt awful and putrid. Out of the mixture on the floor, she picked up the rope and wiped off the fluid from the rope using a piece of clothe, then, they 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, and the rope... well, you'll see."

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 Ifatoyin, 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 Ifatoyin'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 Ifatoyin 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.

"Se kò sì, ṣomo 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 ìmòtótó (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 ìró. 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! Abebíí!!" ("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 akínkónjú, 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, "È kú ìpónjú, iyá wa. Olódùmarè á tẹ Adígún yín sí àfẹfẹ ìrẹ." ("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'i yín... 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. "Omọ 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 Ìrèmòjé, 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 Ìrèmòjé," Bósè said as they walked together.

"What is that?"

"Ìrèmòjé is the rite of passage for hunters and warriors, as decreed by Ogun, the Orisha 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,  
Òpẹ́ ìrókò tí ndúró ní àárín ogun,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!*

*Ó jà bí ọrọ, ó ṣe bí òjò,  
Ajanaku, o! Ajanaku, o!  
Èjé ọmọ-ogun tí ò lè dànù,  
Òpẹ́ 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 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 wooden window 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 was 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 reawakening 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: Misery has no friends

### ***Beleku - When Darkness Falls***

[Continued from the Chapter ***Beleku - A Desperate Flight***]

"He has been accused by the Oluade family of murdering their son, Olujide, during their scouting mission. The accused has refused to answer questions about what happened." The town crier's voice echoed strangely, sounding both distant and piercingly close, as if coming from inside Beleku's own skull. He opened his eyes to find himself being dragged into the court by two guards, the fever tilting the room and making the faces around him swim.

"You are the one they call Beleku?" Baálè's question cut through the fog.

"That is not my name!" Beleku replied angrily, "My name is—"

"Shut up!" One of the seated chiefs, known as Gbogiti expression severe, spoke sharply. "How dare you speak to the Baálè like that, you wretched creature. If you make another sound, I'll have your tongue."

The chief's voice cut through the room, and Beleku fell silent under its weight. The Baálè watched him calmly, an unreadable look in his gaze.

A figure rose from the back of the room, voice firm yet cold. "If I may, my lord."

He bowed before the Kabiyesi, who had not yet spoken a word. "You may rise." Kabiyesi said, beckoning to the young man. The king's voice was surprising high-pitched, and through his fever-haze, 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.

Oludaare's voice was taut as he addressed the court. "You all know the past he drags with him..." He hesitated, avoiding Beleku's gaze. "Even as children, we were

warned... The tragedy of his parents..." The words trailed off, weighed with something unspoken.

Unease rippled through the court, some of the elders shifting in their seats, as if Beleku's presence had drawn shadows from forgotten corners. Beleku saw their eyes—some turned away, others staring with that same old mix of pity and fear.

Oludaare cleared his throat and his voice hardened. "From the bogs to the graveyards, he was always near... wherever death clings."

The words swirled around Beleku like smoke, and with each accusation, the fever alongside his anger spiked. '*They don't understand,*' he thought bitterly. '*Perhaps, they never will.*

There was a slight rustling before Iyalode's voice broke in, soft but pointed. "Wasn't he the one found with all the dead livestock last harmattan?"

"He was, my lady," Oludaare replied, bowing to her. "Though some say it was wild animals that attacked..." His voice was tinged with derision.

"Wild animals indeed," an Gbogiti muttered. "Just as 'wild animals' led his mother into the forest that night?" The whisper sparked a wave of uncomfortable murmurs.

Beleku's hands clenched into fists, his nails digging into his palms. He wanted to scream at the Chief, or even defend himself, but it didn't help when he was younger, he didn't expect it to help now.

"Ahh. Why would you say such a thing?" Odoofin replied.

"Se iro lo wa pa ni?" (He's not entirely wrong, is he?) Osi added.

"We all know the dangers of the forest. Some of us have lost family to its depths. And while these... incidents around him are unsettling," Odoofin chose his words carefully, "bringing up a child's loss of both parents serves no purpose here except to color our judgment with old fears."

"Enough!" Kabiyesi's voice resonated through the court, silencing all murmurs. "We are here to determine the truth about Olujide's death. The accused's past misfortunes, however tragic, are not on trial today. Let us not drown in old fears."

"Your highness!" Oludaare protested, his voice tight with barely contained grief. "My accusations are not based merely on past... misfortunes."

He raised an object wrapped in a bloody piece of fabric. "Here is my brother's finger, alongside a piece of his plaited hair." He unwrapped it before the chiefs, revealing a thumb and a clump of hair, matted with dried blood.

"Here is my brother's finger, alongside his hair." He unwrapped it before the chiefs, revealing a thumb and a clump of hair, matted with dried blood.

"Ahh. How could this be?" One of the chiefs exclaimed. A wave of horrified gasps rolled through the gathering. All eyes settled on Beleku, who continued staring at the floor, hoping it would swallow him whole.

His mind flashed back to that horrible dawn—the entities that had torn into Olujide. The memory twisted his stomach, bile rising as he struggled to keep control.

// *Anansi: Beleku did not know it at the time, but those entities would later be known as The Corrupted of Omi—don't worry, I will tell you about them in due time.*

"These are grave accusations, young man," Baálè's voice cut through the noise, stern and steady. "And while I have my own reservations about the accused," he continued, glancing toward Beleku, "I believe I speak for most of us when I say we must deal in facts, not fears." He turned to Ajanaku. "Balogun, what did your scout report when he returned?"

Ajanaku's expression remained impassive as he replied, "When Beleku returned alone, he was injured and clearly shaken. He claimed..." He paused, his tone wary. "He claimed Olujide had run off on the way back. Then, he spoke of... something attacking them in the forest. His words were unclear, fevered."

Baálè turned to Oludaare, his gaze intent. "An accusation has been made that your brother abandoned the mission. Do you wish to respond?"

Oludaare's face tightened, his voice breaking as he spoke. "My brother has fought for Oritameje from when he was strong enough to wield a weapon. We are all familiar with the Erinle war. Everyone had to take up arms, and he did."

He let out a deep sigh, "My brother had misgivings about the mission, my lord. He came to me in the dead of night, before they left..." His voice broke, emotion cracking through.

"I urged him to go! And despite his distress, his misgivings, he went—for his home, for my sake, for the sake of everyone here today."

His voice cracked further as he violently shook his head, "He was no coward."

He turned to the court, "Does that sound like a coward to you?" He turned back to the Baale, "With all due respect, does it?" The Baale did not respond, he simply pursed her lips in sympathy.

Oludaare wiped his eyes, then he turned to Beleku, making eye contact, "This he-goat came back bearing my brother's finger, accusing him of being a coward who ran away!" He stopped and knelt on one knee, his voice choked. "Olujide was known for many things in this town, but cowardice was not one of them."

"I never called him a coward," Beleku interjected, his voice quiet but firm. The room fell silent at his sudden speech. The words had escaped before he could stop them, and he immediately regretted breaking his silence. *The memory of Olujide's final plea echoing in his mind. 'How do I explain what happened without sounding mad?'*

"Then speak!" Oludaare whirled to face him. "Tell us what happened to my brother!" he yelled, "What did you call him? What did you do to him?!"

Beleku's jaw clenched, as if the words themselves were trying to escape despite his effort to contain them. His eyes fixed on some distant point, and after a moment, he fell silent again.

The truth clawed at his throat—that Olujide was already torn and broken, that death was a mercy he didn't receive in time. But who would believe such madness? Especially coming from him.

When he finally lifted his gaze from the floor, there was a haunted weight in his eyes that made even Oludaare pause.

"Your silence until now speaks its own tale," Abebi observed, her tone both curious and cautious. "Yet, when accused of calling him coward, you defend yourself. What of the greater accusation—his death? Why do you not defend yourself from that?"

The court stirred uneasily. This was more than just a trial for murder; it touched something deeper, something festering in their sense of security. A scout was dead, another accused, and the question of their borders loomed ominously. Rumors of the Omi soldiers making their way had spread across town.

*'If I told them the truth,'* Beleku thought, his heart racing, *'about what we saw in that forest... about what those things did to him...'* He forced himself to stay steady, the tremor in his hand hidden under his cloak—a tremor that could just as easily be seen as fear of judgment instead of haunted memory.

"Even if he were to speak now," Chief Olugbade's voice boomed from his seat, "who among us would rest easy with him returning to our ranks?" Another voice echoed, "The Oluade family would never accept his presence without retribution."

*'They're right,'* he thought bitterly. *'I am guilty, not guilty of murder, but guilty of surviving, of letting him go. Maybe this is justice after all.'*

"Are we to condemn a man on such grounds?" Iyalode's voice cut through the murmurs, clear and unyielding. "Yes, given his history, there are questions. But the consequence we speak of is death, not mere punishment or banishment. An execution has not taken place in many moons."

"I agree," another chief interjected, nodding solemnly. "Justice must be served, but it should be tempered with wisdom and humanity. And we must consider the

stability of our village." His gaze settled heavily on Beleku. "Yet his silence troubles me deeply."

Beleku felt the intensity of every stare, '*If only you knew what real inhumanity looked like, I will take the executioner's blade*' he thought, remembering the things he had witnessed. The memory of Olujide's screams mixed with his final whispered request: "Don't let them take me... help me die... please..."

Ajanaku rose slowly, and something in his bearing made the assembly fall quiet. "As the commander who sent them on this mission, I bear my own weight in this matter." He paused, his next words chosen with care. "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 guilt, lest I send another innocent man to his death."

'*But how can I be innocent?*', Beleku thought bitterly, even as relief washed over him at Ajanaku's intervention. '*I couldn't save him. I couldn't even grant him the mercy he begged for in time.*'

"We should involve Ifá in this matter," Ajanaku concluded, turning to face the Kabiyesi directly. This brought Beleku some relief; perhaps, through the divination, an explanation could come to light without him having to speak the horrors himself. '*Let Ifá reveal what mortal tongues dare not speak*', he thought, clinging to this new thread of hope.

"The Oluawo Ifagbemi is away on pilgrimage to Ile-Ife, with most of the other priests," Baale responded. "We can only rely on one of his apprentices, Ifakolapo, who has been under his tutelage." Baale turned, pointing to the back of the court at Ifakolapo.

"Ah! Èmi kè?" ("Ah! Why me?") the young apprentice said a little too loudly.

All eyes turned toward Kolapo, who had been quietly observing. His heart pounded. He hadn't expected to be summoned in such a weighty matter, especially in his father's absence. '*First divination after Itefa, and it's a matter of life and death,*' he thought, feeling his throat go dry.

"Step forward," Kabiyesi said, signaling with his Òpa Àṣẹ, the staff of authority. Ifakolapo approached with a mixture of apprehension and a flicker of determination.

"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, straightening his shoulders.

"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 Iyalode, loud enough for Kolapo to hear. The slight kindled a spark of anger in the young man.

Iyalode replied "Òmo Ìfágbeñí máa ní iyèn" (That is actually Ifagbemi's son), to which Odoofin opened his mouth in surprise, "Really? He has grown quite a bit."

"May I begin, your highness?" Kolapo asked, frowning slightly as he bowed. '*I'll show them what Ifagbemi's son can do,*' he thought, his earlier uncertainty hardening into determination.

The Kabiyesi nodded. Kolapo knelt, spreading his divination mat before him with practiced reverence. He lifted his Ikín Ifá, the sacred palm nuts warm against his palms. He began to chant an incantation, his movements grew more fluid, more certain, as though guided by unseen hands.

"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 intently, a mixture of hope and dread coiling within him. '*What if the divination reveals the truth?*' The question gnawed at him. '*Would they believe it? Would they understand that the real danger wasn't me, but what waits in the forest?*'

His vision began to blur, Kolapo's voice twisting into strange, inhuman sounds. Confused, Beleku looked around, only to see the heads of the court members replaced with the heads of birds—hawks, owls, parrots—all staring at him with dark, unreadable eyes.

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?" before launching toward him, beak open.

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.

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. His mind immediately flashed to that night with Olujide, to those things he watched from the hole. '*Are they back? Did they follow my blood trail?*' he stared at the forest floor again to see if there was anything, but still could not see.

Beleku lay still, cradled by the rough embrace of the tree branch, his body taut as the silence of the night closed in around him. Only his ragged breaths broke it, mingling with a distant, mournful wailing—a sound both achingly human and yet too otherworldly to belong to a person. No... this was different. Not like the noises those soldiers had made. This was something else entirely.

*'It must be one of the forest spirits,'* he thought to himself in the dark silence.

*'Whichever other horrors haunts these woods, I don't intend to find out.'* But the thought was almost comforting—forest spirits, at least, were something he understood, something from the stories of his childhood.

In his fever-wracked state, softly, barely above a whisper, he recited: "Osanyin, lord of healing leaves, You who know the forest's secrets, Guide my path to medicine, Let your wisdom ease my pain."

He was definitely not leaving the tree tonight. He slowly laid on the tree branch, and stretched out his other leg to get comfortable, and stared into the darkness above him for the rest of the night, unable to sleep, unable to move his injured leg.

In the depths of his despair, he spoke a malediction into the darkness, his words laced with bitterness: "Let the one responsible for my suffering know my pain. May the justice levied against thieves be levied on the one who stole my freedom with the lies that unfurled from his cruel tongue." In his mind, only one name burned: "Ifakolapo."

## **Lore Notes - The Corrupted of Omi**

*I admit, I have shrouded the truth about Olujide's death in mystery. Do not fret, I will reveal where the threads connect in due time. It is a tale of unprecedented corruption.*

## **Beleku - The Forest's Guidance**

As dawn broke, Beleku, still racked with pain and fever, knew he had to descend from the tree or risk dying of infection. With a mix of desperation and determination, he began to cautiously slip down the tree. He grabbed onto a vine and slipped down to the forest floor, his heart pounding with each rustle of leaves.

The forest had begun to come alive again, though the haunting cries from the previous night still echoed in his thoughts. He needed medicine - badly enough to risk movement in daylight. He began to wander through the forest in search of herbs, carefully marking trees along his path in case he needed to find his way back, but being cautious not to leave an obvious trail.

His attention was caught by a group of monkeys. Initially, he tensed— he was now scared of any sudden movement in this forest, but their ordinary, natural behavior slowly eased his paranoia.

Beleku watched the playful primates with a mix of curiosity and envy. '*Even in this dangerous forest, they find joy, living freely*' 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 stopped, as though waiting for him to catch up. He hesitated, remembering all too well how quickly safety could turn to horror in these woods. Then fever-addled pragmatism won out. '*Like I have anywhere else to go,*' he thought. '*At least monkeys will see anything dangerous faster than I can.*'

As he followed, keeping a wary eye on his surroundings, he collected herbs, though billygoat weed still eluded him. The monkeys 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 his nose caught a rotting smell. His body tensed - the last time he'd smelled decay... No, this was different. Following cautiously, he happened upon a mango tree, its floor covered in rotting fruits. 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. Something caught his eye - a small, misshapen shadow darting between the trees ahead. When he looked again, it was gone, but this time he felt no terror.

He picked mangos from the lower branches and peeled bark from the tree, remembering their medicinal properties. With these, he might stave off infection. As he worked, one of the monkeys pelted him with a mango seed. Annoyed, he picked up a stone, then hesitated, choosing instead to yell 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. When he looked toward the sound, he saw a sight that made him pause - a giant ape watching him, standing on one leg and holding a staff adorned with birds. The ape's head was wrapped in a head tie woven from fresh leaves.

'Osanyin?' The thought flickered through his fever-clouded mind. His grandmother had told him stories of the divine herbalist, the one-legged orisha who knew the secrets of every leaf in the forest.

Before he could be certain of what he'd seen, the figure jumped, grabbed a branch, and swung away, leaving behind only disturbed leaves and a clear path to the stream.

He followed, his heart beating faster. If indeed Osanyin had guided those monkeys... perhaps there was hope for him yet. Even in this forest that had shown him such horrors, the old powers still held sway.

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. The lingering fragments of his dream about the trial slowly faded as he became reacquainted with his surroundings.

His mind cleared quickly as he realized that darkness was approaching and he had no shelter for the night. The memory of last night's haunting cries spurred him to action. "I can't be caught out here after dark," rising despite his protesting muscles, "The horde of terrifying... the smell, that filthy smell, I can never forget..."

*'I need to find shelter,'* he thought, 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.'*

Beleku knew he needed to find shelter. The person had not returned, so, he gave up waiting for them. His first thought was to return to the tree he'd slept in the previous night, but after wandering the forest all day in search of herbs, he'd lost his bearings. Even if he could find it, his throbbing foot made climbing impossible now.

As he walked along the stream bank, searching for any suitable shelter, he spotted an African fig tree, its massive root system sprawling across the ground. There was a hollow space among the roots, and his hand immediately clenched at the sight, phantom pain shooting through it. The memory of his hand being stuck under inhuman weight flooded back. No. He wouldn't hide in the ground again.

He pressed on, looking for alternatives - a fallen tree, a rocky outcrop, anything but a hole in the earth. But as he searched, the evening birds began their haunting

calls, warning of approaching darkness. Each caw seemed to mock his dwindling options.

Reluctantly, his steps led him back to the fig tree. This time, he forced himself to study the hollow more carefully. The thick, twisted roots formed walls and a ceiling, like the ribs of a shelter. Unlike the simple hole that had nearly become his grave, this space had structure. The interior was dry, and most importantly... he studied the entrance. Wide enough to slip through quickly if needed.

*'At least I can scramble out of this one,'* he thought, trying to convince himself. *'Not like before, when I was trapped...'* He looked around one last time, desperately hoping for another option, but the lengthening shadows left him little choice.

With trembling limbs, he lowered himself into the hollow. Every muscle in his body screamed at him to run, to find somewhere—anywhere—else. The memory of that night flashed through his mind: the crushing weight above him, the sound of his bones giving way, the desperate prayer that whatever it was wouldn't look down...

He positioned himself where he could see the entrance clearly, his back pressed against the curved wall of roots. Despite his exhaustion, every sound made him flinch—the rustle of leaves, the distant call of birds settling for the night, the soft whisper of wind through the roots.

But as the last traces of daylight faded from the forest floor, his body's demands began to overwhelm his fear. His eyelids grew heavy, each blink lasting longer than the last. Even as his mind raced with memories of horror, exhaustion dragged him inexorably toward sleep.

## **Beleku - What Darkness Hides**

He found himself once again in the Kabiyesi's court, where Kolapo was deep in the divination process. Beleku had remembered the young apprentice's earlier confidence, but in this dream, Kolapo cast the sacred palm nuts with trembling hands, the quiet clatter echoing across the hushed chamber.

*"Agbó máa sáyé o, agbó máa sáyé òrun, bí a kò bá mò ní, ó jé kí a mò."*  
("Let the earth speak, let the heavens speak, and if we do not know the truth, let it be revealed.")

The patterns on the wooden board were unfamiliar, shifting and twisting in ways that seemed almost defiant to his understanding. Kolapo's gaze darted over the sacred palm nuts, seeking some recognizable sign, but their arrangement was elusive, slipping from comprehension just as he thought he grasped it. *'This can't be right,'* he thought, panic stirring beneath his calm exterior.

[?. there has to be an odu ifa that works here. Research one that will appear confusing.]

Closing his eyes, he drew a steady breath and prayed that clarity would come. *Orunmila, guide my eyes.* But when he opened them, the patterns remained stubbornly cryptic, as if taunting him.

His fingers hovered over the board, uncertainty knotting in his chest. He cast the nuts again, willing the message to reveal itself, but the arrangement was still just as indecipherable.

A sheen of sweat gathered on his brow as the crowd's silent anticipation weighed down on him. *'What if I am not ready?' The thought was a whisper of shame. The bead of sweat fell onto the wooden plaque.*

*'This is a disgrace to my family.'* he thought, shame and fear coiling within him. *My father will disown me for disgracing him in front of the king.'* Desperation took hold, and a dark thought crept in: *'I will just tell them what they already know. This foolish man is not innocent anyway.'*

He cleared his throat, his voice wavering. "The orisha have spoken. Ifá has shown me the truth." He shook his head, feigning sorrow as he met Beleku's gaze. "How callous of you."

Otun leaned forward, his eyes narrow. "K'ini Ifá ti wi?" (What has Ifá said?)

Kolapo continued, his words emboldened by the court's murmurs of approval. "Ifá reveals the truth we feared. This man led Olujide to a secret place in the forest and killed him, lured by dark forces that reside in the forest, a place he's long treated as his refuge. He must be dealt with, or he will bring more misfortune upon us all."

Beleku's heart pounded. *'No,'* he thought desperately, *'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, disbelief and anger rippling through the gathered crowd. Even Beleku, who had prepared himself for countless outcomes, felt paralyzed, unable to process the finality of Kolapo's false prophecy.

The young diviner's voice, laced with feigned certainty, echoed in his ears like a tolling bell, sealing his fate before the gathered court. He looked up at Ajanaku, who met his gaze with a profound disappointment. Their eyes locked for a moment before Ajanaku frowned and looked away. Beleku dropped his gaze to the floor, his heart sinking into silence.

To the court, his silence spoke volumes. What defense could he offer? That Corrupted of Omi had torn Olujide apart? That he had found him already beyond saving, broken and bloodied in ways no one would believe? That Ifakolapo's so-called revelation was as false as the rumors harbored in the hearts of the villagers about Beleku since childhood?

The Kabiyesi, nodded slowly his expression unreadable from the veiled crown as he accepted the divination. "The oracles have spoken," he said solemnly, and Baálè's voice followed, steady and unyielding. "And your silence..." He turned to Beleku, the beads of his crown catching the light, "...your silence damns you more than any word spoken here today."

Oludaare stepped forward, his grief sharpened into a blade of fury. "Whether he murdered my brother or drew death to him with his cursed presence, either way, there is but one answer." His voice wavered as he continued, thick with emotion. "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."

The words settled over the court like the first stones of a grave. Through his fever, Beleku thought he saw shadows writhing at the edges of his vision—or were they memories of those undead soldiers, creeping ever closer to the village's borders? He almost laughed at the bitter irony. They would execute him for a murder he didn't commit, never knowing that the true horrors still lurked out there, drawing closer with each passing day.

A heavy silence settled over the court, thick and oppressive, as the gravity of the sentence weighed on every heart and mind present. After a long and tense deliberation, the council of chiefs and Kabiyesi reached a consensus. The sentence would be death.

Baálè, his voice steady but tinged with 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 Ajogun 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.

Bleleku'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 and a new life.

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 battled with desperate need in his mind.

'*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.

When the Egbere 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 Egbere 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 realized 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**

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, and its leg were very hairy. The Egbere's eyes were large and the sclera was red and veiny. Its nose was flat against its face with wide, flaring nostrils that twitched.

Its mouth stretched unnaturally wide across its face, filled with sharp, yellowed teeth that protruded at odd angles. The skin of its face was a sickly grayish-green, pulled tight across high cheekbones, and covered in patches of coarse, dark hair that grew in uneven tufts.

*'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 Egberere. 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 Egberere'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 Egberere tilted its head, a flicker of something—curiosity? Understanding?—passing through its eyes.

The Egberere'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 Egberé seemed affected, its movements becoming slower, more lethargic.

The dance between the two continued throughout the day. The Egberé 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**

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.

While the Egbere was off in the trees, Beleku packed the rest of the meat into a piece of clothe, he knew he wouldn't always have the opportunity to roast fresh meat when hungry. As he tied the fabric, the Egbere landed, 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. The Egbere jumped into the trees.

Beleku 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. As he walked, he couldn't help but notice. His instincts were exceedingly sharper than they normally were—something was changing within him.

## **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 Egbere 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, except 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 Egbere?"

"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 Egbere 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 Egbere 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 Egbere 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 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 Egbere. 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. The creature got closer and muttered something, as though it was speaking to the boy, or the tree.

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 neck flexed as though his throat had been sealed in terror.

That was when he realized, the boy seemed more scared of him than he was of the creature. Looking down at his blood-covered clothes, Beleku understood why.

"Go," Beleku whispered. "Go, before..."

The boy hesitated. Then, with a final, fearful glance, he turned and fled, disappearing into the trees, 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 Egberé. 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 Egberé's presence hinted at another. Which was the truth? And was he ready to face it?

But most importantly, if he couldn't remember what happened, is it possible that he truly murdered Olujide?

## **Chapter 6: Prophet and Ghosts of the past**

### ***Prophets and Ghosts of the past - Ifatoyin***

The morning air carried the scent of wet earth and smoking hearths as Abebi stepped out of her hut. After forty days of mourning as an Opo, the world beyond her doorway felt both familiar and strange, like a dream half-remembered. The forty days of mourning had ended, but the walls of her hut had become both shelter and prison during that time. She hadn't seen the outside of her hut in over two weeks and hadn't stepped beyond the compound in over a month.

Following the funeral rites, the village elders had arranged for the rethatching of the roof—a ritual that signified the continuity of the household after the death of its head. Since Ajanaku had no surviving male relatives, the responsibility of maintaining the household fell upon Abebi.

She was grateful that Morenike and Bose were here today. The babies had woken her in the early hours of the morning, their cries seeming to echo the restlessness she felt in her own heart. When Bose and Morenike arrived at the compound to help with the babies, they had coaxed her into a game of ayò olópón inside the hut and eventually encouraged her to step outside for a moment.

As she emerged, Abebi looked around the compound. Each pattern in the swept sand reminded her of the intricate battle strategies she and Ajanaku used to draw in the dirt. Now, her footprints broke through these new patterns, marking change, marking loss, marking survival. She stepped forward with her bare left foot, leaving an imprint on the delicate designs. It felt good; she curled her toes, letting the sand sift between them, and then did the same with her right foot. The simple pleasure brought a faint smile to her lips—her first in what felt like ages.

She glanced up at the roofs; the bère grass used for thatching had changed hues since she last saw them, fading from vibrant green to a weathered gold. Palm fronds danced with each other in the morning breeze, and somewhere in the next compound, a mother called out to her child.

The serenity of the compound today brought a bittersweet comfort. 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 relocated by Iyalode, now only traces remained: worn paths in the earth, the occasional lost bead catching sunlight in the dust.

As Abebi surveyed the compound, her eyes caught Ajanaku's hut. The familiar curves of its walls brought back memories. She hadn't been able to summon the courage to enter it since his passing. Each attempt ended the same way: feet growing heavy, breath catching in her throat, memories threatening to overwhelm her.

Today was no different. As she took a tentative step forward, her arms instinctively crossed over her chest, where the weight of the twins had rested just months ago. She tried another step, but with each one, she found her courage waning, her heart drumming against her ribs.

When she got close to the hut, a sudden gust of wind scattered leaves across the compound, the rustle making her start. Relief flooded through her, mixing with guilt at being grateful for the interruption. She halted, her heart still pounding, and turned toward the compound's exit.

The sound had come from Baba Boyega's compound, where his sons were repairing a fallen fence. But something about the wind felt strange—it was too warm for this time of morning, carrying with it the faint scent of herbs she hadn't smelled since childhood.

Before she could ponder this further, she noticed Yelè approaching, his usually confident stride marked by an unusual hesitation. Behind him, his deputy kept glancing over his shoulder, as if expecting to see something following them.

"E nlé o. E kú ewu ọmọ," Yelè greeted, but his voice carried an undercurrent of uncertainty.

The guards, made up of the town's youth, wore a loose-fitting brown tunic that draped over their shoulders, paired with matching trousers.

Abebi turned to face the guard, unconsciously straightening her posture. 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, Yelè's deputy, also bowed but remained silent.

Yelè shifted his short staff from one hand to the other, "I know you are still in mourning, and it is beyond the boundaries of my authority to request this," he began, his voice dropping lower, "but there is... a situation at the central square."

"A situation?" Abebi prompted, noting how he avoided meeting her eyes.

"Yes, there's an old man," Yelè said, unsteadily. "He sits like a statue in the square, but his shadow..." he hesitated.

Yele's behaviour this morning was inconsistent with that of the confident young man she knew him to. "What do you mean, his shadow?"

"It's not just that," the deputy added, speaking timidly from behind. "He's been there since yesterday, hasn't moved, hasn't eaten."

"Who is this old man that you two speak of?" Abeni inquired, feeling uneasy.

"That's just it—I don't know him." Yelè shifted his weight. "I've never seen him before, which is why I confronted him yesterday. But he refused to give me his name. His only response was that he was waiting for you."

Yelè glanced at his deputy before continuing. "I watched him for a while, thinking you might show up. When my shift ended, I stationed two guards to keep an eye on him." He turned to his deputy. "Tell her what happened."

The deputy had been hanging back, but now stepped forward reluctantly. "He... he never left, iya wa. Not once. Didn't move, didn't stand, didn't even seem to blink." He swallowed hard. "I spent the night hidden behind the market stalls. Something about him... it didn't feel right to let him see me watching."

"This morning when I returned to my post," Yelè continued, "I found him exactly where I'd left him, and my deputy hiding like a scared child." There was no mockery

in his tone—if anything, he seemed to understand his deputy's fear. "I questioned all the guards on duty. No one knows him, but none of them wanted to approach him either."

Abebi studied both men carefully. Yelè had been a guard since he was fifteen; she'd never seen him rattled like this. "If he's so suspicious, why haven't you arrested him?"

"I intended to," Yelè admitted. "But something stopped me. The way he speaks... it's like he belongs here more than we do." He straightened, seeming to remember his duty. "Which is why we're here. In light of recent events, I would hate to cause unnecessary commotion, so we deemed it right to find you first, to see if you recognize him." He cleared his throat. "If it's no bother, iya wa. We understand if you're unable to come. If not, we shall bring him before the King's council."

He added firmly, "If you do come and don't recognize him, we'll bring him before the king as an intruder. I have guards ready to move on my signal."

"An old man you've never seen before... that none of your guards seem to know..." Abebi murmured, her eyes drifting as she tried to think who this mysterious visitor might be. She had known Yelè since he was a boy and couldn't think of any elder in the village whom the guard wouldn't recognize—certainly not one who would behave so strangely.

"Give me a moment, wait here, I will be back" she said to the guards and disappeared back into the compound.

Inside the hut, the babies were still sleeping peacefully in their corner, and Bose was losing spectacularly at ayò olópón. Her fingers drummed rapidly on her knee as she studied the board.

"Tell Bose to learn how to respect her elders," Morenike said, her voice carrying a gentle authority reminiscent of Iyalode. A knowing smile played at the corners of her mouth as she captured another set of seeds.

"È fi mìlè jòó!" Bose exclaimed, staring intently at the board. Then, switching to her more formal tone, "Maami Abebi, tell her it's not fair - she's had years more practice!" Her eyes darted across the board.

"I know you said I should look for patterns, but the patterns keep changing!" she bemoaned

Abebi smiled, genuinely this time, watching the interplay between these two who were becoming fixtures in her life. She reached out and gently rubbed Bose's head. "Ahh, you don't even stand a chance today, ọmọ mi. But tomorrow? Who knows?"

The normalcy of the moment almost made her forget the strange conversation outside. Almost. She walked to where the twins slept, caressing their cheeks. Without turning around, she said quietly, "I am needed at the town square... there is someone waiting there for me." AHer hands moved to her wrapper, as she took it off and began wearing a blouse.

"You're leaving the compound?!" Bose jumped up, concern etched on her face. Morenike placed her seeds down carefully, her smile fading into concern. "What do you mean, who is waiting for you that cannot come to the compound if they need to see you?"

Abebi sighed, her hands pausing on the knot she was making on her iro. "No one seems to know." She recounted what Yelè had told her about the mysterious old man.

"What do you mean no one knows?" Morenike's brow furrowed. She rose slowly from her seat, her movements deliberate. "An unknown elder, appearing now of all times?"

"The guard said he's been there since last night," Abebi explained, watching Morenike's reaction carefully. "Yelè's deputy spent the whole night watching him, hiding behind the market stalls."

"Hiding?" Bose whispered, her eyes widening. "Why would a guard need to hide?"

"In light of recent events," Morenike said carefully, stepping closer to Abebi, "shouldn't the guards be more... cautious? What if it's a spy? Or worse?"

Abebi stopped her preparations and considered Morenike's words. While the concern made sense, something about this situation felt different. An assassin or spy wouldn't sit openly in the town square, especially not one claiming to wait specifically for her.

"I am going with Yelè," she said finally, her voice firm. "He is trustworthy. And..." a small, fierce smile crossed her face, "I can hold my own if need be."

Morenike caught her arm. "Remember what the elders say: 'The same wind that extinguishes the candle feeds the bonfire.' Whatever this is, be careful. The time of your mourning may be over, but that doesn't mean you're safe."

"At least let me come with you," Bose added, but Morenike shook her head.

"At least one of you needs to stay here with the children," Abebi said, voicing what Morenike was thinking. "I won't leave my babies unprotected." She glanced at the sleeping twins, then back at her friends. "Yelè has left his deputy to guard the compound, but still..."

Morenike nodded, understanding. She and Bose exchanged looks, having a silent conversation about who would stay behind.

Before either could speak, Abebi was already moving toward the door. She paused at the threshold, one hand on the doorframe. "I'd like for you to both stay. I'll return soon," she promised, though something in her voice suggested she wasn't entirely sure what she would find in the town square.

Outside, Yelè waited with the kind of stillness that spoke of barely contained tension. "Ready, iya wa?" he asked, his grip tightening slightly on his staff.

As she exited the compound, she noticed a squad of guards approaching from the other side. Yelè had called for reinforcements.

"They are here to keep the compound safe in your absence," he said, bowing.

Abebi nodded, and they began their walk to the town square. They passed various compounds, each a dominion of a family. Some families lived in small huts, but larger families resided in clusters of huts that formed a compound. For the wealthier families, their buildings were so large it would be a misnomer to call them huts.

Her mind wandered to her sister Abeni, to their shared childhood in these very streets. If anyone would know what to make of this mysterious elder, it would be her twin. But Abeni wasn't here.

The thought made her straighten her shoulders. She had faced worse, after all. Much worse.

As they neared the square, the air grew thick with an inexplicable weight. Through the morning haze, Abebi made out the figure—the person was wearing the same outfit from her nightmare.

*'Impossible. My eyes must be deceiving me'* she thought to herself, her pace slowed to a halt, *'Is that Oluawo Ifatoyin?'* she muttered under her breath.

Yelè noticed and promptly stopped as well. "Is everything okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Yes," she said, regaining her composure. "I think I know who this is. Is it okay if I walk the rest of the way alone?"

"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. He means me no harm, if he did, I would be dead already."

Yelè stayed back as Abebi continued walking forward. The square was clear; the guards had prevented anyone from entering.

Abebi slowly approached the figure, and the closer she got, the more certain she became of the person's identity. It was Ifatoyin. She was perplexed. As a child, she had been told that he had died.

They locked eyes as she drew nearer. Ifatoyin had barely aged, even though it had been over a decade. She had been a child when he disappeared and was never heard from again. She stopped a few meters away and tried to speak, but words failed her. '*What do you say to a ghost of the past come to life?*'

Ifatoyin stood there, staring into Abebi's eyes. After a few moments, she broke eye contact and knelt before him. She fixed her gaze on the sand in front of her and greeted him with the traditional salutation for an Awo (Chief priest/Native doctor).

"Aboru Aboye Abosise," she said. ("We will make the offering, and it will be accepted; we will survive, and it will be successful.") It was the proper greeting to a familiar Babalawo, but she had nothing else to say..

"Ó ti tó ọdún mélòó tí a rí ùbọ kéyìn, báwo lá şe mò wípé ó máa ye, pé ó máa şisé?" Ifatoyin finally spoke. ("How many years has it been since we made sacrifices? How would you know that it would be successful, that we will survive?") His voice had not changed.

"Where have you been since all these years?" she questioned. "...the village, it has gone through a lot in your absence." she paused, "Are you even real? You are supposed to be dead." she said, her voice breaking.

"Come closer" he beckoned, stretching out his hands. Abebi lifted her eyes from the sand and stood. She cautiously approached him. When she was close enough, he pulled up the sleeves of his top, revealing his arms. He then asked her to touch his arm.

"You possess the warmth of the living," she said, her eyebrows furrowed. "What happened? They said you died." she questioned, observing the old man.

"I had a dream of you..." she began, then stopped. "After you left, my sister—she was exiled..."

He closed his eyes and shushed her gently. "Shh... I know, I know..." He raised his palm, gesturing for Abebi to stop talking. A crowd was starting to form around the chokepoints the guards had created.

"I know what you've been through. But it is not yet time for us to discuss; the time will come soon." He looked around, "I had hoped this would happen differently this time", then, he suddenly pulled her closer and whispered in her ear, "You are one of the reasons I have returned. When the time comes, you will know... You will know where to find me."

The guards, upon observing this, began to charge toward them.

"Ìgbà yen la máa ìṣe àyèwò àwọn ìbejì rẹ!" he said loudly. ("That is when we will perform the *àyèwò*<sup>4</sup> of your twins.")

Perplexed that he knew she had twins, she questioned, "Ahà, báwo l'é ìṣe mò?" ("Aha, how did you know?") But before she could get a response, Ifatoyin shouted, "Egbé!"

The word exploded from Ifatoyin's lips. The air compressed, then expanded in a burst of light that sounded like a small thunderclap, throwing the guards to the ground.

When Abebi opened her eyes, Ifatoyin had disappeared. A pattern formed in the sand where he had been; a single leaf spiraled down, landing precisely in the center of the vanishing design.

'*Egbe*,' she muttered to herself.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ayewo: literally means investigation, but in this context is a ritual to glean insight into a child's future, character traits, and potential life path.

"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 stand a better chance of capturing the wind itself than you did arresting him," Abebi said as Yelè helped her up. "He did me no harm... He just had a message to deliver," she continued.

She then held him by the shoulders and said, "Thank you," then began to walk back home.

"Let me walk you back to your hut," he said, following behind her.

"That would not be necessary," Abebi replied.

"It was not a request," Yelè countered, the confident guard she recognized was back. "I was the one who convinced you to leave your compound; it is my duty to ensure you make it back safely... please."

Abebi reluctantly acquiesced, and Yelè walked her back to her hut. When they arrived, Morenike and Bose were waiting outside with the babies in their arms. The guards stationed at Abebi's compound stood stoically behind them. Morenike let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Abebi returning.

"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 as she got closer. Bose and Morenike shook their heads to signify "no," and Abebi sighed.

She looked at Bose, then at Morenike, whose face teemed with unspoken questions. Abebi volunteered the answer before it burst from their lips. "It was Ifatoyin," she said.

Bose looked confused; she had never heard the name before.

"Ifatoyin?" Morenike asked, puzzled. "But he died!" she exclaimed with concern, "Years and years ago."

"That's what I thought too," Abebi replied. "He left the village on pilgrimage and never returned. It was so strange seeing him in person," she said as she took her seat. "I wasn't the only one who saw him," she added, 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 looked up at Yelè again; he 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.

"Um, what do you mean he disappeared?" Bose interjected.

"I think it was Offè. It means to become one with the wind." Yele replied.

"I could have sworn I heard him say 'Egbe' instead," Abebi responded. Then she turned to Yelè, held him by the shoulder and said warmly, "Thank you."

The guard said nothing, nodded, and went on his way. The three women entered the hut, where Abebi contemplated Ifatoyin's words.

Over the next few days, there were multiple sightings of the old man by men and women, young and old, farmers and blacksmiths. Even the king had caught a glimpse of Ifatoyin while walking through the palace grounds. From his peripheral view, he spotted Ifatoyin watching him from afar, but when he looked, the man was gone. Stories and rumors soon began to circulate.

## ***The Regent***

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 Olohungoyin (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 often had to rely on just words to gauge his 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 gbogboin leyin enikeji re l'oju mii," (There is barely any of you that has not been envious and deceptive to another person present here today) he intoned. The court collectively held its breath as the king's words sank in.

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 Mólèṣà. We must be careful!" Odofin exclaimed.

"We all know the reason my sister left. We cannot have a repeat of such tragedies." Abebi 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 nṣ'ọ owó, owó no la fi nṣ'òbè.' 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. Olohungoyin, 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.

**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 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 an affront to the King... your new role puts a target on your back..." she caught herself, Abebi was right. She had been inexorably pulled into a web of conspiracies without her consent. Iyalode's voice softened. "I will visit you soon. Air your grievances to me in private then. I promise to listen." 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 on a small rock, 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... still mostly known as Oderinde at the time." he finally turned around.

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 though he had heard her say it out loud. "As the saying goes, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' To us, you are our daughter, even in your adulthood."

He turned around again and pulled out an axe from his garment, he said an incantation and brought the axe down on the rock he had been sitting on. The rock split in two, setting off a chain reaction that split a straight line across the landscape, revealing a hidden path.

"Walk with me... my daughter," he said, watching her reaction; "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."

After walking for a while, they came upon two small boulders. Upon further observation, Abebi noticed, it was the same split boulder they had begun the walk away from.

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: Yes, and no. It's the same rock, but no we are not in the same place." he paused, as if trying to find a way to explain, then he stopped.

"That's true, it's not that important" he said.

"Are you going to keep doing that?" Abeni questioned, "Reading my mind"

"I cannot help it, unfortunately," the old man responded, "It is a blessing and a curse." he continued, staring at the ground.

A moment of silence passed, then, he continued speaking, "Unto your next question, '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. Arun o le pa mi, iku o de le ri mi gbe se" (Pestilence cannot quell my life force, neither can death triumph over me).

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, climbed mountains with fire gushing out of their center, crossed great rivers and lakes, seen civilizations rise and fall. This kingdom, like every one of those places I traveled to, I left behind when my work there was done." he coughed.

"I continued my journey to my next assignment, and now I have returned" 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.

### ***Unfamiliar Alliances - Iwofa***

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Iyalode's compound as she sat outside her hut, seeking respite from the day's heat. She picked up a kolanut from the wooden bowl beside her, splitting it methodically as her mind wandered to Abebi's words at the courthouse. The tension between the King and Olugbade worried her—Olugbade was not a man to suffer humiliation quietly. Breaking off half the kolanut, she sighed deeply, knowing he would act rashly, and soon.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew her attention. A tall, slender man walked towards her compound, his gait hesitant but purposeful. She had seen him around the village in recent months, usually heading toward the healer's compound, though they had never spoken. These days, every unfamiliar face warranted careful attention, even if somewhat familiar. Her hand instinctively moved closer to the staff leaning against her chair.

As custom dictated, the man stopped at a respectful distance and prostrated himself. But before he did, his eyes had swept the compound in a quick, practiced motion—the gesture so swift Iyalode might have missed it had she not learned to watch for exactly such details in the past.

"Iyalode, I come with a heavy heart, having heard of your son's passing," he said, his voice gentle. "Though I did not know him personally, his reputation for kindness and wisdom reached even our village." he paused and looked up at Iyalode, "He was someone I looked up to, please accept my condolences."

Iyalode studied him carefully, her gaze lingering on his worn farming clothes and the calloused hands. Yet, something about his posture—too refined, too practiced—unsettled her, a detail her instincts noted even as she nodded in acknowledgment.

"Thank you for your kind words," she replied, her voice measured. "Though I'm afraid I don't recognize you."

"My name is Aláká, from the Sonibare family in Ijimo village<sup>5</sup>," he said, remaining prostrate. "My grandmother was born here in Oritameje, though she married into our village. I've been coming to the village for some months now, seeking treatment for my son."

Iyalode nodded slightly, recalling seeing him with a small boy. "So tell me, son of Sonibare, what burden brings you to my compound?"

Aláká sat up but remained on his knees, respect evident in his posture. "I come seeking help," he took a deep breath, his voice steady despite the plea in his words. "When my father died, I inherited his yam farm, but what should have been a blessing has become a burden. A devastating pestilence claimed my crops, leaving the land barren."

As Aláká spoke, Iyalode observed his demeanor, his choice of words with care. She listened without interruption, though her eyes never stopped their assessment.

"As you the elders say, 'Ise loogun ise'" he clenched his fists and gestured holding a hoe, "Hard work is indeed the antidote to poverty. When the pestilence took my crops, I told myself this would not be my end. I prepared to replant everything we lost."

"I had hoped to salvage what I could," Aláká continued, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "But misfortune rarely travels alone. My son, Olayinka, fell ill. The planting season was approaching, but between his treatments here in the village and the loss of my crops..." His voice trailed off, the weight of his struggles evident in his hunched shoulders.

A brief shadow of pain crossed Iyalode's face at the mention of a sick child. "And how is your boy now?" she asked, her voice softening slightly.

---

<sup>5</sup> One of the neighboring villages allied with Oritameje

"He is well, thanks to your village's healer." A small smile softened Aláká's features, "He just turned seven, strong enough to run me ragged."

"Too young to help with farm work," Iyalode observed, studying him over the remaining piece of her kolanut. The man's story seemed true—she had indeed seen him carrying a small boy to the healer's compound throughout the past season.

Aláká nodded, then hesitated before continuing. "Yesterday evening, I walked past your son's farm." then gestured respectfully toward the path leading to her son's farm." He paused, gauging her reaction. "I noticed the palm trees are beginning to ripen... they are ready for harvest soon."

Iyalode had an idea where he was going, but she felt unease at the mention of her son. Her fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around her kolanut. She had learned to hear the words behind words, to look for daggers hidden in simple requests.

"What exactly are you proposing?" she asked, her tone neutral but firm.

Aláká straightened slightly, though still maintaining his respectful posture. "I wish to offer myself as Iwofa," he said. "I would oversee the harvest of your son's farm next month, and maintain it until the rainy season comes for my yam planting." His eyes met hers briefly before lowering again. "I know it's uncommon to accept Iwofa from outside the village, especially now, but—"

"Especially now," Iyalode echoed, letting the words hang heavy between them. The recent attack had left more than physical scars on their community. Trust had become as precious as water in a drought.

Sensing her reluctance, Aláká pressed on. "I understand your caution. I can bring people to vouch for me...", he paused, "...but you wouldn't know them either."

"Iya wa, I've been coming here for months with my son, the people in the healer's compound know me." His voice took on a note of quiet desperation. "Bi a ko ba reni fehinti, bi ole laa ri." (If we have no one to rely on, our misfortune may appear to be a result of laziness to the world)

The old proverb caught Iyalode's attention. In these times of quick tongues and forgotten wisdom, it was rare to hear the old ways spoken so naturally. She studied him again, noting how despite his desperate situation, he maintained his dignity.

The old proverb caught Iyalode's attention, in these times of quick tongues and forgotten wisdom, it was rare to hear the old ways spoken so naturally.

But then, her eyes narrowed slightly. For a farmer claiming desperate circumstances, he spoke with unusual refinement.

"You speak well for a farmer's son," she observed, her tone carefully neutral.

Aláká's shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly. "My father believed that wisdom could grow in any soil," he replied. "He taught us our traditions alongside our farming."

"Us?"

"My brother and I," he clarified. "Though he chose a different path."

Iyalode studied him carefully, noting how despite his desperate situation, he maintained his dignity—perhaps too much dignity. "Which healer has been treating your son?"

"Baba Ajao," he answered. "Though I've mostly dealt with his apprentice, Taiwo."

"Baba Ajao... How did you manage the payment?" The question was deliberate—she knew well that many who couldn't afford treatment became gbami o ra mi, bound in service to the healer.

"I traded what little harvest I had saved," Aláká answered. "It wasn't much, but Baba Ajao was merciful. His apprentice Taiwo took special care of my boy." He paused, a shadow crossing his face. "Though now, with the failed crop..."

Iyalode noted how he avoided mentioning the gbami o ra mi option - either he was too proud to consider it, or there was more to his story than he was sharing. "There is a little girl there that is fond of my daughter. I forget her name. I wonder if you met her during your visits."

Something flickered in Aláká's eyes - recognition, perhaps relief. "Ahh, Bósè, yes, she used to play with my Olayinka. The girl has been kind to him during his treatments."

This, at least, added some weight to his claims. Iyalode broke off another piece of her kolanut, considering. "You claim your grandmother was from the Sonibare family," she continued. "Their only daughter, you said?"

"Yes," Aláká nodded eagerly. "The daughter of the last son of the Sonibare family. She was his only daughter before she married my grandfather and moved to Ijimo."

"Yes," Aláká nodded eagerly, though his response came a heartbeat too late. "The daughter of the last son of the Sonibare family." His words were perfect, almost practiced "She was his only daughter before she married my grandfather and moved to Ijimo."

Something in the careful construction of his answer made Iyalode's neck prickle with unease.

Iyalode broke off another piece of her kolanut, considering. The Sonibare family was known to her, though she hadn't heard of this connection before. She nodded, "Sonibare." then she fell silent. 'Such claims are easy to make,' she said finally, "and harder to verify."

After a few moments. Aláká's hands tightened in his lap, but his voice remained steady. "I know asking for Iwofa is no small matter, especially in these uncertain times. If you permit me to demonstrate my commitment, I'll take anything you offer. In addition to the labor and repayment, you would have claim to a portion of my yam harvest when it comes." He paused, then added with careful emphasis, "Though no claim to my farm itself, given my family ties."

The sun had moved considerably since their conversation began, lengthening the shadows across Iyalode's compound. She watched as a dry leaf skittered across the ground between them, carried by the late afternoon breeze. Finally, she spoke.

"Return in three days," she said, her tone brooking no argument. "Bring your son."

Aláká prostrated himself once more, relief and apprehension warring briefly on his face before he masked both. "Thank you, Iyalode."

"Return in three days," she said, her tone brooking no argument. "Bring your son."

Aláká prostrated himself once more, relief and apprehension warring briefly on his face before he masked both. "Thank you, Iyalode."

As he rose to leave, Iyalode added, "And Aláká?" He turned back, expectant. "Bring your son with you when you return."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment and departed, his tall frame soon disappearing around the bend in the path. Iyalode watched him go, her mind already mapping out the inquiries she would need to make. The timing of his

request was either very fortunate or very suspicious - and in these times, coincidences made her uneasy.

She popped the last piece of kolanut into her mouth and called out, "Morenike!"

Her daughter emerged from the shadows of the doorway where he had been listening. No words needed to be exchanged—they had worked together long enough to know what needed to be done. As Eyìn slipped away to begin making discrete inquiries, Morenike settled back in her chair, her fingers drumming thoughtfully on its arm.

She looked across the sky, there was still enough time before dark. She took a walk to her son's farm. As she approached, she observed that the palm trees on her son's farm would indeed need harvesting soon. The question was—could she trust this eloquent farmer with more than just her crops?

The walk to her son's farm felt longer than usual, each step heavy with memories. A half-finished basket lay near the palm trees—he'd always insisted on weaving his own, just as she'd taught him. The sight of it broke something inside her. Here, away from watchful eyes, she finally let her tears fall, her fingers trailing over the rough weave of his last unfinished work.

## ***Unfamiliar Alliances - Iwofa II***

During those three days, Iyalode's compound hummed with quiet activity. She had taught Morenike well in the ways of their position - her daughter knew the delicate dance of gathering information through the market women, the palace servants, and the countless others who passed through their compound daily. Like her mother, she understood that truth, like palm oil, often settled at the bottom of things.

Their investigations revealed layers. At the healer's compound, both Taiwo and Bósè confirmed the boy's presence over many market days. Baba Ajao, who kept track of debts through careful knots in his counting rope, verified that payment had been made in yams - though the quantity suggested Aláká had traded away most of his harvest.

More telling were the whispers from the farmers who traveled to their market. Most spoke of generous rains and promising crops, but one account caught Iyalode's attention. The merchant who supplied most of their market's yams described seeing fields near Ijimo village ravaged by an unknown blight, the soil left with an unusual taint. The location matched Aláká's claims.

When the appointed day arrived, Iyalode was already seated in her customary place, her eyes on the path that wound through the compound. The morning air still held its coolness when Aláká appeared, this time not alone. A small boy walked beside him, clutching his father's hand. In his other hand, he held what appeared to be a carved wooden bird, its details suggesting skilled craftsmanship.

Aláká and his son prostrated themselves before her. The boy, though clearly instructed in proper greetings, kept sneaking glances at his wooden bird even as he lay face-down.

"Rise," Iyalode commanded. Her eyes fell on the toy. "That's fine craftwork. A gift from your father?"

The boy clutched the bird closer, suddenly shy. Aláká cleared his throat. "No, Iyalode. He carved it himself."

She raised an eyebrow. "Did he now?"

"Show her, Olayinka," Aláká encouraged gently, his calloused hand resting protectively on his son's shoulder. When the boy hesitated, Aláká knelt beside him, his farming clothes dusty. "Remember what I told you about your gift? It's like the birds themselves chose your hands to give them shape."

The boy stepped forward, holding out the bird. Up close, Iyalode could see that while the carving was indeed skillful for a child his age, it bore the unmistakable marks of young, learning hands - slight irregularities in the wing feathers, a beak not quite symmetrical.

"You have your father's hands then," she said to the boy. "Do you help him on the farm as well?"

Olayinka glanced at his father before answering. "I try, but Father says I'm still too small for the heavy work."

"And your illness? You seem strong now."

"Baba Ajao made me drink bitter medicine," the boy said, then brightened. "Like the ones Aunt—" He stopped abruptly as his father's hand tightened slightly on his shoulder.

Iyalode's eyes narrowed at the slip, but she merely nodded, filing away this fragment of information for later consideration.

Iyalode nodded, then turned to Aláká. "I had my daughter verify your claims." She let the words hang in the air for a moment. "The farm you spoke of does indeed exist, and shows signs of the blight you described."

Relief flickered across Aláká's face, but Iyalode wasn't finished.

"However," she continued, "your proposal requires careful consideration. Tell me, why seek Iwofa here, when Ijimo has its own lenders?"

A shadow crossed Aláká's face. "There is a man there... Otunba Fadeyi. He offers Iwofa terms, but his reputation..." He glanced at his son, then back to Iyalode. "Those who accept his terms often find themselves unable to ever repay the debt. Their children's children remain in his service."

Iyalode knew of such practices. Some used Iwofa as a mask for acquiring permanent servants, twisting the terms until freedom became impossible. She studied the man before her—his careful speech, his skilled hands, his obvious care for his son. Everything she had learned suggested his story was true, yet... something felt off about him.

"I will consider your proposal," she said finally, "but with conditions." Aláká waited expectantly, relief and apprehension warring on his face.

"To confirm your competence," Iyalode began, "you'll not receive your loan until after the first successful and timely harvest from my son's farm." Her voice caught slightly on the word 'son', but she continued smoothly. "If successful, you may plant your millet and sorghum."

"Millet and sorghum?" Aláká's brow furrowed. "I had hoped to replant yams."

"You speak of yams," Iyalode said, her voice gentle but firm, "Igi gogoro magun mi loju okere lati n wo." She let the words hang in the air for a moment before translating, "A large log about to poke one in the eye is best avoided from a safe distance." Her eyes met his, her voice firm. "Why would I invest in a farm previously wrought by pestilence? What assurance do I have that yams will survive again? We must consider different crops."

Aláká's fingers interlaced in his lap as he considered. "The pests rely on food to survive. If we leave the land barren for the rest of the season, they will starve, and by next season—"

"Are we fully certain this was merely a pest problem?" Iyalode shook her head. "No. Planting something else would be wiser. Sorghum and millet are different enough from yams. They require less rainfall and have shorter harvest cycles. If they fail, the loss will be minimal."

A slight 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. If you make your way to the palace before tomorrow, and you'll receive grains for free."

Aláká shifted uncomfortably. "I am grateful for your wisdom, but I have little experience with those crops. I NEED to plant yams—"

"Wa olore re lo si waju nigbayen," Iyalode interrupted sharply. (Be on your way and seek assistance from another then.)

"Ki won ma ba ni alaimore ni mi. Mi o kan fe tan yin je ni," Aláká quickly responded, raising his hands in a placating gesture. (I simply wish to be transparent, so they do not say I am an ungrateful man,) "I meant no disrespect, Iyalode."

Iyalode studied him for a long moment. The shadow of recent events hung heavy in the air. Trust had become a precious commodity, yet here she was, considering extending it to a stranger. But then, wasn't that what her son would have done?

"Let us try things my way, if you fail," she continued finally, "I'll pay you half of what I'd pay another for the labor of harvesting my son's farm, but... I retain the right to collect all the produce from the sorghum millet harvest if I see fit."

Aláká considered this for a moment, nodded slowly, repeating softly, "A pe koto jeun kin je baje." He looked up, meeting her gaze. "In my village, there is a lender, as I mentioned. When I lost my crops, he offered terms without a moment's concern for whether I could succeed. It felt like walking willingly into a trap." His voice strengthened. "I was right to seek help from you instead. Thank you for showing interest in my success."

Iyalode extended her hand. "Do we have an agreement then?"

Aláká prostrated himself once more, this time in gratitude rather than greeting. "E şeun, I agree to your terms," he said, then rose to his feet.

"I wonder," Iyalode started, a hint of amusement in her voice. "Does your brother share the same habit? The clever words."

"Ah," Aláká's eyes sparkled with unexpected humor. "My parents spoke to each other in nothing but proverbs. Sometimes we wouldn't understand what they were arguing about until days later."

"Is that so?" Iyalode's lips curved slightly. "It must have been quite the household."

"Most of today's youth don't even know half the wisdom they've missed," Aláká agreed, then caught himself, adding hastily, "Though I suppose I'm not so old myself to be complaining."

"No, you're not," Iyalode agreed, her amusement fading into something more contemplative. She called out, "Morenike!"

Her daughter emerged from the doorway. "Show Aláká to the farmland." She turned back to Aláká. "My guard will accompany you both."

She reached for another kolanut, but she stopped halfway, reflecting on her decision. She was worried the crops would fail. "Whatever may come of this, an unpaid loan is a favor owed."

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across her compound as she rose from her seat. She had given a desperate man a chance—something her son would have done without hesitation. Whether that decision would prove wise or foolish, only time would tell.

## **Chapter 7: The Apostate and The Exiled**

### ***The Apostate - Hope***

The priest jolted awake, his heart thundering against his ribs like a war drum. Sweat had soaked through his mat, plastering his back to the damp surface as though the river itself had claimed him in his sleep.

His limbs felt weighted with lead, refusing to move despite his desperate commands. Each breath came shorter than the last, as if invisible hands were slowly tightening around his throat.

Through sleep-crusted eyes and the hut's oppressive darkness, Okeoghene saw it: a figure lurking in the corner, adorned in the blood-stained armor of the Omi soldier he'd killed in the forest. The apparition clutched a club fashioned from human bones, its outline growing more substantial with each shuffling step toward him. Terror clawed up his spine, choking off what little air remained in his lungs.

A sudden movement at the doorway sent his heart racing faster—the mat covering the entrance fluttered, letting in a brief flash of light before falling back into place. A voice called his name, familiar yet terrifying in its impossibility. Okeoghene lay trapped between two horrors: the approaching specter he could see and the disembodied voice he knew couldn't exist.

Three days had passed since the massacre. Three days of burying the dead, of being the sole survivor in a village of ghosts. Yet here was a voice calling to him, drawing closer, forcing his mind to replay fragments of that night—blood-slick machetes, screaming children, the sickening thud of clubs against flesh.

A firm hand gripped his shoulder, yanking him back to reality. His paralysis broke, and he shot upright, coming face to face with a young man he never expected to see again.

"Idoreyin?" The name escaped as barely a whisper.

"Yes." The young man's face was gaunt, haunted.

"Am... am I dead?" Okeoghene's question hung in the air until a piercing cry shattered the tension—one of the twins awakening.

Idoreyin leaped back, startled by the sudden wail. Okeoghene moved with practiced caution to the window, allowing just enough light to navigate to the basket. He lifted the crying infant with gentle hands, his movements precise and careful—a far cry from the man who had once ordered these same children abandoned to the forest. The baby settled against his chest, and he returned her to her sibling before the crying could wake the other.

"You're alive!" Idoreyin's voice cracked with emotion. "And the babies—are those—"

"How are you here?" Okeoghene cut him off, sliding sideways to retrieve a cutlass hidden beneath the mat. The blade glinted in the dim light as he leveled it at Idoreyin's throat. "Was it you? Are you working with them?" His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "It was you, wasn't it? Tell me if you're alone, or I swear by Ekpeyong, I'll paint these walls with your blood."

The accusation struck Idoreyin like a physical blow. He crumpled to his knees, eyes wide with hurt and betrayal rather than fear. "Why would you think that of me?" His hands rose in surrender, he closed his eyes tightly and began to quiver. . "I'm not alone... but I'm not with them. Please... don't kill me. All I've done is sa-save a few lives. That's all I've done."

Shame washed over Okeoghene as he lowered the blade. Here was another survivor, another soul carrying the weight of that night, and he had greeted him with steel instead of solace. "Get up," he commanded, softer now.

Idoreyin rose slowly, his trousers were wet, he had peed himself—fear had marked him in more ways than one. Wordlessly, Okeoghene retrieved a clean pair of pants from his meager supplies and offered them to the young man.

He turned aside, allowing Idoreyin privacy while keeping him in view, unwilling to fully lower his guard despite his shame.

"You..." he started, "You said you... saved lives?" Okeoghene prompted, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Yes." Idoreyin's voice steadied as he changed. "The survivors are hiding in the town hall. I told them to wait while I searched for others." He smoothed down the borrowed trousers with trembling hands. "Eight of them. That's all I could save."

"Eight?" Okeoghene sank onto his stool, the number hitting him like a blow to the chest. "From the whole village?"

"Mama Effiong and her youngest. The fishmonger's wife—"

"Abasiama?"

"Yes. She saved three children who were hiding near her hut. And then there's old Etim the palm wine tapper and his grandson." Idoreyin's voice

"Tell me how," Okeoghene said, studying the young man's face. "Tell me how you survived that night."

"I had slept through the afternoon." Idoreyin's words came slowly at first, as if drawn from a deep well. "The storm kept me from night fishing, so I went to mend my nets instead. Didn't even take a torch with me—thought I knew the path well enough." He gave a bitter laugh. "That darkness saved my life."

"You saw them coming?"

"A torch first, weaving through the trees. Then they doused it at the forest's edge." Idoreyin's hands clenched into fists.

"Why didn't you raise the alarm?"

"I almost did. But then I heard Okon—" Idoreyin's voice cracked. "They poured out of the darkness like evil spirits, dozens of them. I heard Okon's warning—" His voice cracked. "They cut him down mid-shout. I can still hear the way his voice just... stopped."

He drew a shuddering breath. "I knew then that shouting would only mark me for death."

One of the twins stirred in the basket. Okeoghene glanced over, then back to Idoreyin. "How did you get the others out?"

"So you ran?"

"No. Not at first. I moved through the village, quiet as I could, waking people. Sent them toward my boat." Idoreyin's eyes grew distant. "My sister's hut was last. I thought... I believed I could save them all."

The grief in his voice made Okeoghene's chest tighten. He knew what came next—had seen the evidence of it himself.

"When I got there, they already had them." Tears began to flow freely down Idoreyin's face. "My sister... my little niece... they were marching them out of the hut."

"It's alright," Okeoghene said softly, moving to comfort him, but Idoreyin pulled away.

"No, it's not alright!" He slammed his fist against the floor. "I watched! I just stood there and watched! When they started coming my way, I ran like a coward. I was a coward!"

Okeoghene gripped his shoulders firmly. "Listen to me. You saved lives that night. Eight people breathe because of you."

"But my sister—" he broke into tears. Okeoghene held the man as he cried.

"I know where they rest," Okeoghene eventually said. "Come. I'll take you to them."

He helped Idoreyin to his feet, but before they reached the door, he paused. "The babies you saw... no one can know about them. Do you understand?"

Idoreyin wiped his eyes, nodding slowly. A look of recognition crossed his tear-stained face, but he asked no questions. It was a quiet walk to the grave.

"I'll wait for you at the town hall," Okeoghene said as they reached the graves. "Take the time you need." Okeoghene kept silent about how many others lay in that same earth.

As he walked away, leaving Idoreyin to his grief, the image of the dead soldier in the forest flashed through his mind—flies gathering on exposed brain matter, empty eyes staring at nothing. He pushed the thought away. There would be time for those ghosts later, for now, duty called.

### ***The Apostate - The Town Hall***

When Okeoghene reached the town hall, the air inside was thick with grief and fear. Eight survivors huddled in the shadows—faces he'd known all his life now marked by trauma. Mama Effiong cradled her youngest to her chest, while Abasiama sat with three children pressed close to her sides like frightened birds. In the corner, old Etim held his silent grandson, the boy's eyes fixed on something no one else could see.

The priest took a deep breath, steadying himself before speaking. "Our village is no longer safe," he began. "We must leave before the raiders return."

"And go where?" Abasiama's voice cracked. "Obutong?"

"Yes. It's our best hope." Okeoghene moved to the center of the room. "The council there has strong ties to us. They will take us in."

"But the docks are destroyed," old Etim spoke up. "The raiders burned our boats."

"Not all," Okeoghene said. "Idoreyin's boat survived. It should be large enough for all of you."

Mama Effiong caught his choice of words. "All of us? Will you not come with us, priest?"

Okeoghene's hand instinctively touched the pouch where he kept his ritual items. "I must perform sacred rites to ensure our safe passage. The gods demand..." He paused, the lie bitter on his tongue. "I must travel separately. To protect you." He had to travel separately to keep the babies a secret.

The survivors shifted uneasily, but none challenged him. Even now, after everything, they clung to their faith in the old ways. The irony was not lost on him.

"Mama Effiong," he turned to the nursing mother. "I need your help. Could you prepare enough pap for a three-day journey? For my... ritual purposes."

She nodded, though her eyes held questions she dared not ask. "I'll need to use what's left of the corn."

"Take what you need. The rest of you, gather only what you can carry. We leave at first light."

As the survivors began to move out, Idoreyin returned. His eyes were red, but his face was set with determination. As the survivors began gathering their meager belongings in the town hall, Okeoghene and Idoreyin made their way to what remained of the docks.

## ***The Apostate - A Listening Ear***

In silence, they worked together, salvaging flat pieces of wood and reeds to construct a small raft. The destroyed pier and empty sea beyond served as a stark reminder of the raiders' thoroughness—they'd burned the boats and ruined the docks to ensure no captives could escape by water.

"You lied to them about the babies," Idoreyin finally broke the silence. He glanced around, ensuring they were alone. "You didn't want to tell me earlier, but they are the rebel's babies, aren't they?"

Okeoghene took a deep breath, tying a knot with rope fashioned from an old fishing net. "Yes, they are." He pulled the knot tight. "But it isn't what you think."

"Then, tell me... why did you save them?" Idoreyin gestured toward the hut. "Are they secretly your children too? They are twin children, and they are days old. The timing of the attack, the twins' appearance—it cannot be coincidence"

The priest's hands stilled on the rope. So many questions, each one pushing harder and harder at a door he wanted to leave shut. He shook his head and bent back to his work, trying to ignore the young man's probing stare.

That's when his eyes fell on a dock support log—small, but large enough to serve as a club. The thought came unbidden: one quick movement, and he could end Idoreyin and his questions. He could tell the others they'd been attacked at the dock, that Idoreyin had died a hero's death. No one would ever know about the twins' true origin, about Abeni's sacrifice, about his own failures...

But then the memory of the forest rushed back—the soldier's club, the sickening thud of bone, the flies gathering on exposed brain matter. And worse, the broken bodies of Idoreyin's sister and niece, victims of similar violent calculations. Disgusted with himself, he bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

Idoreyin moved closer. "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."

A sound escaped the priest's throat—something between a laugh and a sob—revealing his blood-stained teeth. "You have no idea what I've seen in the last few days... Listening ear," he laughed again, the sound hollow and raw.

His hands trembled as he worked the rope, movements growing more erratic with each twist. "Nobody cares about a listening ear. I am just not trying to relive memories that can lead to madness." The net slipped from his grip, and instead of picking it up, he snatched the one Idoreyin was holding.

"Go away!" The rope bit into his palms as his fingers whitened around it. "I have nothing to say to you. If you like, go tell the rest what you saw for all I care. We'll probably all join your family in that same grave in a few days anyway."

Idoreyin's voice softened. "My grandmother used to say the tallest palm tree bends the lowest in the storm. Even you, the one we all looked to for strength, are allowed to break." He took a careful step back, maintaining his distance. "Everyone in that hall has their own darkness. Some of us were carrying it long before that terrible night." He paused, then added quietly, "You know, I left one detail out about that night... Given that you were about to kill me in that hut, I didn't feel it necessary to tempt death again. But I saw you. I saw you that night."

The priest's expression shifted, his brows knitting, mouth opening in disbelief.

"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." Idoreyin's voice grew softer. "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?"

He barely paused before adding, "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."

Okeoghene sighed heavily, staring at the sky before raising his hands in surrender. His shoulders slumped, as if finally setting down a heavy burden. "I did..." His voice cracked. "I took the babies into the forest, to the exact spot that I always did."

He picked up a stone, turning it over and over in his hands. "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." The stone flew from his fingers, skipping across the water's surface. "But before the end of the night, it did... I don't know how."

His voice grew distant as he told Idoreyin everything—about Abeni, the cave, the ritual, and why the twins' survival meant so much to him now.

Instead of disbelief, Idoreyin offered understanding. "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 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." He pushed himself to his feet, studying the raft critically. "Wait here. I have an idea."

When he returned, his arms were full of supplies and two massive gourds. "We will need a way to keep the babies fastened to the raft, and a shelter to protect them from the sun and the sight of the others." Idoreyin's voice was firm, purposeful.

With skilled hands, he tied the gourds together, creating a soft bed of reeds between them before securing the makeshift cradle to the raft. Black cloths were fastened over each gourd, with small holes for access and air. "This is where you will keep them. The villagers will see the gourds and assume they are filled with concoctions."

His hands stilled on the cloth as he spoke his next words carefully. "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 terrible night, the priest smiled—a genuine smile that spoke of hope and trust reborn in the ashes of their shared tragedy.

### ***The Apostate - A new journey***

The last rays of sunset painted the water crimson as the raft bobbed gently against the shore, ready for departure. The survivors crowded onto the boat while the priest settled onto the smaller raft, secured to the vessel by a thick rope. As they pushed into deeper waters, darkness crept across the sky.

A survivor lurched to his feet, signaling Idoreyin to halt. As the boat slowed, he pointed toward the docks—or what remained of them. Splintered wood and broken posts mirrored the destruction they'd left behind. This was no safe haven. The invasion had spread like a poison through their lands.

"We need to turn around," a woman's voice cracked through the growing darkness. Murmurs of agreement rippled through the boat. From his position on the raft, the priest could only catch fragments of their frightened whispers, but their meaning was clear. Then the woman's voice rose to a wail.

The villagers tried to muffle her cries, but her pointed finger drew their attention to the treeline. Arrows whistled through the twilight, one finding its mark in a man's eye with a sickening thud.

Idoreyin sprang into action, racing to the stern. His blade sliced through the rope tethering the raft, and he managed one final nod before an arrow pierced the back of his upper neck, emerging through his nose. The priest dropped flat against the raft's surface, paddling frantically with his oar. The sudden movement sent the larger container of babies' pap tumbling into the water with a betraying splash.

Arrows hissed overhead. As the priest turned to gauge their position, he witnessed something that froze his blood. Figures burst from the tree line, their movements jerky and desperate as they hurled themselves into the water. They thrashed toward the boat with unnatural determination, most unable to swim yet driven by some terrible force.

In the failing light, he caught a glimpse that would haunt his dreams—a soldier with a sword lodged through his skull, eyes fixed unseeing in his direction. More corrupted soldiers piled onto the first, dragging him under in their frenzy. The priest's jaw slackened, terror rising up his spine like ice.

Standing now, he drove the oar through the water with desperate strength. When he reached a shadowed bend in the waterway, he tucked the raft against the bank, clinging to the stems of water plants.

His breath came in ragged gasps as he strained to listen for any movement. 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.

Through the rustling leaves and distant splashing, a man's voice pierced the darkness—a quiet plea for help. The priest eased himself from the raft, wading carefully through the undergrowth until he found its source: a man missing most of his left leg and his right hand, his face contorted with pain and fear.

As the priest approached, the man's eyes widened with recognition. "I know you," he whispered, voice trembling. "You are an Epke."

The priest nodded. "How did you get here?"

"I was a captive." Each word seemed to drain him. "Escaped... yesterday."

He drew a ragged breath, chest heaving with the effort. "The soldiers... they set up camp in Obutong after the conquest. Everything happened so fast—they dragged me from my hiding place and threw me in one of their cages. They'd brought supplies, you see... materials to build them." A violent fit of coughing interrupted his story, flecks of blood appearing on his lips.

The priest quickly offered his water gourd. After a few careful sips, the man continued, his voice haunted.

"The day after the conquest, I watched two soldiers challenge each other to wrestle. The first one removed his armor, his shoes..." He shuddered. "That's when it began. He started scratching at his eye. Wouldn't stop. Kept going until blood flowed down his face." The man's hands trembled as he clutched at the priest's arm. "I have never seen anything like it—the way he clawed at himself..."

His breathing grew more labored, but he pressed on. "He grabbed a piece of wood, started digging at his bloodied eye with it. When he threw that aside and pulled out his knife, the other soldier tried to stop him. But the first one—he just grabbed him and slammed him to the ground." The man paused, wheezing heavily. "As soon as the second soldier touched the earth and stood... he just... he stabbed himself. Then they both turned their blades on each other."

Tears carved paths through the dirt on his face. "I thought it was divine intervention at first—our enemies destroying themselves. But as the madness spread, one of them realized the truth. It was the soil itself." He broke into another coughing fit, this one longer and more violent. The priest supported his head until the spasms passed.

"The soil..." the man gasped, "...contact with it drove them mad. After they figured this out, they locked up all the affected soldiers. They raided the town for every piece of fabric they could find, laid it on the ground to walk on." His voice grew fainter. "They started torturing us then, demanding we tell them how to cure their comrades. Some climbed trees, afraid to touch the earth..."

The man's grip on the priest's arm weakened. "I escaped when they brought everyone in my cage out, but..." His breathing became shallow and irregular. "Some of the mad ones... they were in the forest. This morning, I woke to one of them..." His left hand ghosted over his mangled leg. "He just... left me here to..."

A wet, rattling cough shook his entire body. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as his eyes began to lose focus. His grip on the priest's arm slackened

completely, fingers twitching once, twice, before his chest rose and fell one final time.

The priest bowed his head to whisper a prayer, but the sharp crack of breaking twigs sent him scrambling back toward the raft. As he paddled away, his mind raced with fear and guilt. Then, an understanding struck him like lightning—*'Aebi, Perhaps, her death had something to do with this... the cave.'*

## ***The Apostate - The hidden face of Vengeance***

### **[NEW CHAPTER - in the works]**

Realization settled heavily over Okeoghene—with all nearby villages likely overrun and the forests unsafe, only two options remained, one was to return to the cave to investigate what truly happened when Abeni died, the other was to seek the one refuge that remained: his cousin Timidi's sanctuary.

Years ago, when Timidi's rejection of their faith had forced his exile, the priest had provided him a haven far downstream, past where the stream emptied into the delta. Only a giant Baobab tree marked its location.

Okeghene considered his promise to Abeni, then, he chose the second option. Through the long night, Okeoghene huddled on the raft, the horrors he'd witnessed keeping him from returning to the village. At first light, he began navigating downstream, but the unwieldy raft fought his every attempt to maintain course. As the sun climbed higher, frustration mounted—the Baobab tree seemed to have vanished into the maze of waterways.

Time and again, he returned to his last known position, searching for familiar landmarks. The babies stirred, awakening with hunger. Their remaining food would barely sustain them, and still, he drifted lost among the channels.

Accepting temporary defeat, he portioned out their precious food supply, offering each child just enough to quiet their hunger. As he prepared to resume his search, he noticed the water's surface had grown mirror-smooth. He let the raft drift, allowing the current to guide them.

The first baby settled quickly after feeding, nestling into sleep. As he cradled the second infant, something caught his eye—there, ahead, the massive Baobab stretched toward the sky. His earlier failure made sense now; he simply hadn't ventured far enough downstream.

Relief flooded through him at the sight, but it evaporated as he drew closer. A bleached skull hung from one of the branches, its empty sockets watching his approach. His heart clenched. The second baby began to fuss, threatening to cry. Quickly, he offered her the last of their food, waiting until her eyes fluttered closed before proceeding.

After securing the raft, Okeoghene stepped onto the dock, every sense alert. No immediate danger presented itself, but the marker was just the beginning—his cousin's true refuge lay hidden in the dense thicket beyond. Beneath the hanging skull, a black pot sat ominously at the tree's base—a clear warning to turn back.

*'If this is how I die, then this is how I die,'* he thought. But when he looked back at the sleeping infants, he knew recklessness wasn't an option. This was their last hope for food and safe passage. Irodeyin's final words echoed in his mind: *'We can only do what we are sure is right with the time we have left.'* Twilight was approaching rapidly. If he wanted to navigate the forest, he needed to move 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, "I promise," he 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. The forest floor remained shrouded in shadow. An unnatural silence hung in the air—no scurrying animals, no night birds, only the whisper of leaves stirring in his wake.

A sudden breeze carried movement at the edge of his vision. His heart thundered against his ribs, but he forced himself to remain still. Dropping into a crouch, he scanned the darkness, afraid even to breathe. Visions of stalking predators—or worse, cannibals—flooded his mind. He waited, straining to hear past the rustle of leaves, but no further sounds emerged.

Cautiously, he crept toward the source of movement. Neither beast nor man awaited him, but a simple piece of cloth tied to a tree branch, dancing in the wind. As he drew closer, something about the fabric caught his attention. Holding it up to catch the filtered moonlight, he discovered familiar markings etched across its surface—Nsibidi symbols, the secret writing system he and his cousin had studied in their youth. The symbols indicated a direction, and hope flickered in his chest. He was on the right path.

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 low-hanging branch. As he reached out to untangle it, eager to decode its message, a sudden force seized his wrist. The world spun as he was yanked skyward, he dropped his cutlass, and was ensnared in a fisherman's net and left dangling upside down.

A distant horn blew, echoing ominously through the trees. His heart raced as he realized his mistake—it had been 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, attempting to speak with the child, but the child vanished into the shadows as silently as he had appeared.

Panic mounting, he twisted in the net, searching the darkness. More figures emerged, each wearing masks, forming an ever-tightening circle around him. Two

stepped forward—a man and another boy different from the first. The man cut him down. His relief at being freed lasted only moments before the silent figures closed in despite his desperate pleas.

As he searched their masked faces for any hint of mercy, a blunt force struck the side of his head with devastating force. The forest floor rushed up to meet him, and his consciousness fled into darkness.

## **The Exiled - Timidi**

### **[NEW CHAPTER - in the works]**

The chief priest jolted awake, his senses flooding back in a sharp, unrelenting torrent. The dull throb in his head pulsed rhythmically. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the silhouette of a cage materialized around 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 with hope of being released from the cage.

But the response was not immediate. Timidi's silence hung heavy in the air, then, he tried to speak. Three times, Timidi tried to speak, three times, he failed, but he eventually spoke, with a tone that seemed to carry the weight of a thousand words, unspoken through the years..

"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 weak, powerless. I took pity on them. 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. Again, I set the traps, but this time, they caught nothing for days on end. One morning, when I went to check the bait, 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.

"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.

"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 by 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 desperately 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 with something urgent." 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 else 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! My mother, 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 here alone... I found them by the shore."

Then, the realization hit Timidi, and an 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 in the past" he paused.

"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."

"And you have come here? Why? To seek..." Timidi stopped mid sentence. "You are seeking absolution aren't you... from me?" Timidi's question hung heavy in the air. The priest hesitated.

"No. There's another 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.

# Chapter 8: Aditu

## *The Serpent's Counsel*

### [NEW CHAPTER]

Seven days of solitude had done nothing to quell Olugbade's rage. If anything, the isolation had honed it into something sharper, darker—a blade forged in the fires of humiliation. As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the world in hues of purple and indigo, he approached the Ogboni shrine. Its silhouette loomed against the twilight sky, a brooding mass of stone and shadow.

Figures moved furtively in the gathering darkness—messengers and supplicants slipping away like whispers on the wind. Olugbade recognized the insignias of noble houses embroidered on their robes. They avoided his gaze, faces hidden beneath cowls, but their hurried steps betrayed them. *What secrets have been shared within these walls?* he wondered.

At the shrine's entrance stood guards he had once trained—stoic figures clad in traditional attire, spears in hand. Their eyes met his, holding a flicker of recognition and perhaps... anticipation. They did not move to bar his way.

*Seven days ago, they stripped me of my title before the king's court, he recalled bitterly. Seven days of watching shadows creep across barren walls, haunted by the echoes of derisive laughter and the smug faces of the nobles. And Abebi, seated with unearned authority...*

The shrine towered before him now, tendrils of sacred smoke escaping through high, narrow windows. A curtain of intricate beads hung in the doorway, each bead carved with symbols of protection and secrecy. They clattered softly in the evening breeze, reminiscent of a serpent's rattle—a warning and an invitation.

Squaring his shoulders, Olugbade parted the beaded curtain. Inside, the air was thick with the rich aroma of incense—sandalwood mingled with myrrh and a hint of something earthy, almost primal.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light cast by copper braziers, he took in the chamber: cushions arranged in a semi-circle, their fabrics lush and embroidered; maps sprawled across low tables, marked with symbols and annotations; and subtle movements in the shadows—the slither of scales against stone.

"Enter," a deep voice resonated, seeming to emanate from the very walls. "I have been expecting you."

Through the haze, Olugbade discerned the imposing figure of the Mistveil. Seated upon an elevated dais draped in dark silks, he exuded an aura of both majesty and menace. His large frame was adorned with layers of rich fabrics, and heavy copper rings encircled his thick fingers. The flickering light accentuated a distinctive cleft lip, giving his mouth a perpetual, enigmatic curve—a serpent's subtle smile. Resting across his broad shoulders was an albino python, its scales shimmering like pearls.

Other serpents moved languidly in the chamber's periphery, their forms weaving through shadows. The atmosphere was alive with a quiet tension, a sense of coiled potential.

"Welcome, Olugbade," the Mistveil intoned, his voice smooth yet laden with unspoken depths. He gestured to a nearby cushion. "Sit. Share in the serenity of this space."

Olugbade remained standing, his gaze unwavering. "You summoned me," he said, his tone edged with defiance. "I seek what is mine—the position of Balogun restored."

A hint of amusement flickered in the Mistveil's eyes. "Always so direct," he mused. "But tell me, why grasp for a single title when the horizons stretch wide with untapped possibilities?"

"I have no patience for riddles," Olugbade retorted. "If you have counsel to offer, speak plainly."

The Mistveil leaned forward slightly, the python adjusting gracefully. "Very well. The winds of change stir the leaves of even the oldest trees. Those who heed their whisper may find themselves soaring, while others remain rooted, bound to the fate of the forest."

Olugbade's gaze drifted to the maps on the tables. Strategic points were marked—gatehouses, guard rotations, supply routes. His warrior instincts prickled. "What is all this?" he demanded.

"A tapestry of opportunities," the Mistveil replied. "But perhaps a story will elucidate my point."

Olugbade's brow furrowed. "A story?"

"Yes," the Mistveil said, his voice taking on a melodic cadence. "One that bears wisdom for those willing to listen."

Despite himself, Olugbade felt a pull, a curiosity that bid him to hear more. He lowered himself onto the cushion, its surface soft beneath him.

"In a time of great famine," the Mistveil began, eyes reflecting the braziers' glow, "there lived a blind man who sought the king's aid. Moved by pity, the king gifted him yams and meat but cautioned, 'Speak of this to no one.' Grateful, the blind man agreed.

"Yet, upon returning home, he encountered a cripple who begged for sustenance. Compassionate, the blind man shared both his food and the secret of the king's generosity. The cripple, driven by hunger, sought the king, and while the King wasn't fascinated, he afforded the cripple the same aid, along with the same warning. But he, too, could not keep silent and told a poor man of the king's kindness.

"When the poor man approached, the king began to see his secrecy unraveling, but he gave to the poor man nonetheless. Finally, a thief approached the poor man, but the poor man refused to help. He kept the King's secrets. The thief eventually deduced where the food had come from. When he visited the king, he professed

ignorance of any prior gifts, he had simply decided to seek out the king on his own. Pleased with his discretion, but also recognizing him as a thief, the king instructs the thief to steal from the blind man and the cripple, knowing they cannot defend themselves or report the theft, while advising him to avoid the poor man, who might report the crime to the king. Consequently, the thief robs the blind man and the cripple, who are unable to retaliate or seek justice. And so, the thief reclaimed the gifts, and the king's secret remained guarded."

The Mistveil's words lingered in the air, intertwining with the incense smoke that curled like serpents around them.

Olugbade contemplated the tale. "You imply that discretion yields power," he said slowly. "That those who act wisely can shape their own fate—and that of others."

"Indeed," the Mistveil affirmed. "And perhaps you see yourself in the thief—a man positioned to act when others cannot."

"Or perhaps the king," Olugbade countered, testing the waters. "Manipulating those beneath him to secure his desires."

A subtle smile touched the Mistveil's lips. "Interpretations vary. The question is, which role do you wish to embody?"

Silence stretched between them, filled only by the soft hiss of the braziers and the barely perceptible movements of the serpents.

"What is it you propose?" Olugbade finally asked.

"The king's jubilee approaches—The bere festival," the Mistveil said, his gaze unwavering. "A time of celebration, where vigilance wanes. There are those who believe the kingdom needs... new direction. Leadership that understands strength and vision."

Olugbade's heart quickened. "You speak of treason."

"I speak of opportunity," the Mistveil corrected softly. "A realignment for the betterment of all. Your skills, your leadership—they are valued. With your aid, the transition can be swift and just."

He gestured to the maps. "Your knowledge of the western gates is unmatched. Your men remain loyal to you, not the throne. Together, we can ensure a future where honor is restored."

Olugbade weighed the copper ring on the Mistveil's finger, noting the serpentine patterns etched into it. "And what guarantees do I have that I won't simply be a pawn in another's game?"

The Mistveil inclined his head. "Because you hold a key piece of the board. Without you, the picture is incomplete. This is not a mere exchange of one ruler for another; it's the dawn of a new era."

From within his robes, the Mistveil produced a copper ring identical to his own. He extended it toward Olugbade. "A symbol of our accord. Join us, and shape the destiny of the kingdom."

Olugbade took the ring, feeling its cool weight in his palm. The metal was smooth, the engravings intricate—a serpent consuming its own tail.

"Consider this," the Mistveil added, his voice barely above a whisper. "Abebi sits in a seat unearned. The king grows complacent. Change is inevitable. The only question is, will you be a catalyst or an obstacle?"

The albino python regarded Olugbade with unblinking eyes. In that moment, he felt a kinship with the creature—both poised to strike, both instruments of fate.

He slid the ring onto his finger. "I will align with you," he declared. "But know that I do this for the honor of my name and the future of our people."

The Mistveil's smile widened slightly. "Of course. Together, we shall usher in a new dawn."

As Olugbade rose, the serpents shifted, creating a clear path to the exit. The Mistveil's voice followed him. "Remember the wisdom of the tale. Discretion is paramount. When the time comes, we will act swiftly."

"Understood," Olugbade replied.

Passing through the beaded curtain, he emerged into the night. The cool air was a stark contrast to the warmth of the chamber. Moonlight bathed the surroundings, casting everything in silver hues.

He noticed movement among the trees—figures slipping between shadows. Some he recognized: nobles disillusioned with the king's rule, warriors seeking purpose. All wore copper rings that glinted subtly in the moon's glow.

A small serpent crossed his path, its scales dark as obsidian. It paused, lifting its head as if acknowledging him before disappearing into the underbrush. *Even the smallest can play a pivotal role*, he mused.

Olugbade gazed toward the distant city lights, where preparations for the jubilee were undoubtedly underway. The weight of the copper ring was a constant reminder of the choice he'd made.

*Seven days of solitude forged my resolve*, he thought. *Now, I step into the shadows to reclaim not just my honor, but to redefine the fate of a kingdom.*

He began the descent back to the city, each step measured and purposeful. The path ahead was uncertain, but for the first time in days, clarity burned within him—a cold flame of determination.

"A new dawn awaits," he whispered, the words carrying into the night like a solemn vow.

Behind him, the shrine stood silent, its secrets guarded by mist and shadow. The beads at the entrance swayed gently, the faint sound reminiscent of fate's delicate machinations—a symphony only those attuned could hear.

### **Vignette - True power lies...**

*// Where does true power reside? Is it in the open spaces, where kings and dignitaries hold court beneath the sun? In the grand processions where royal staffs strike earth and proclamations echo through marketplaces?*

*Or does it lurk in shadow-shrouded rooms, behind doors marked with symbols no common eye can read? In midnight councils where rank holds no meaning, where whispers shape the fates of both mighty and meek alike?*

*Perhaps true power lies not in what commands attention, but in what remains unseen—in the spaces between heartbeats, where destinies turn on a whispered name.*

## ***Unfamiliar Alliances: The Convergence***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

The ropes fell away. Blood dripped from the Egberé's blade—fresh blood, mingling with the dark stains that already coated its small, grotesque frame. Ekanem stumbled back, his newly freed hands trembling.

Before him stood a blood-covered man speaking in Yoruba. The words were incomprehensible, his tone gentle yet unnervingly at odds with the gore staining his clothes. Ekanem's throat worked, but no sound emerged.

That gentleness made the scene more terrifying. Even the strange creature beside the man—its massive scaled hands incongruous with its diminutive size, its weeping red eyes gleaming—seemed less of a threat.

Ekanem's gaze flicked between his rescuers. The Egberé's eyes glinted with an unsettling intensity, its small form made grotesque by the oversized, scaled hands. Beside it, the man—Beleku—stood still, blood soaking his clothes until they appeared black in the dim light. The strange mat slung across his back shimmered faintly, drawing Ekanem's attention before he forced himself to look away.

Panic seized him. He turned and fled, branches whipping against his face as he crashed through the undergrowth. Behind him, the growl of thunder grew louder.

The forest swallowed him whole. He ran blindly, glancing back every few steps, expecting pursuit. When he'd put enough distance between himself and the clearing, he spotted a familiar lightning-struck tree. He needed his bag—the amulet, the eko, and the supplies he had taken from Imomotimi's hut.

The lightning-struck tree would lead him to the hiding place. But first, he had to know if they were following. Pressing his back against a rough tree trunk, he scanned the path behind him, his breath coming in shallow gasps. Nothing moved—he was alone.

The bandits' gear had been well-maintained; they must have shelter nearby, maybe even a village. He could find it, if he was quick. Dark clouds gathered overhead as he crept toward his hidden bag.

Soon, the rain began to fall in heavy, deliberate drops. He tried to follow the trails left by the bandits—broken branches here, trampled grass there—but the paths splintered endlessly. The wind howled through the trees, its force scattering leaves and masking any approaching sound.

The first crash of lightning illuminated the forest for a fleeting moment, stark and menacing. Ekanem pressed on, his resolve fragile but unyielding.

He tested different paths through the forest, finding dead ends and false trails. Signs of human passage appeared—broken branches, trampled grass—but led nowhere. The wind picked up, making tracking more difficult as branches swayed overhead. Temperature dropped noticeably, and he felt the storm's approach in his bones.

As he explored, he discovered yet another confusing fork in the barely-visible trail. Ahead and slightly uphill, an overhanging rocky outcrop caught his eye; a natural hollow in its face. The approaching storm forced his hand — shelter first, settlement later.

He approached the outcrop from an angle, staying low and checking for signs of previous occupation, there were signs of old occupation, nothing recent. Better than being caught in the open. He circled it once, noting escape routes, before the rain drove him inside.

Ekanem scrambled inside, pressing his back against the cold stone. His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Water streamed from his clothes, forming small rivulets that ran toward the cave's mouth. Thunder cracked so close it made his teeth rattle.

The lightning that followed froze his blood. Two figures approached through the rain—familiar figures. The blood had washed partially from their forms, but dark stains still marked their outlines. Beleku entered first, moving with deliberate

slowness. He set his weapon down with exaggerated care and raised his empty hands. The strange mat on his back caught what little light remained, shimmering slightly.

The Egbere followed, and in the confined space of the cave, its otherworldliness became impossible to ignore. Its massive hands hung at its sides, the scales catching lightning flashes like wet metal.

The sack it wore as clothing dripped steadily, its waist heavy with charms that clinked softly with each movement. Those red eyes fixed on Ekanem with an unsettling mixture of irritation and curiosity.

*'Run? Fight? Stay?' Ekanem's options raced through his mind. 'Which will kill me faster?' His muscles coiled to spring, but exhaustion made his limbs feel like lead. The storm raged harder, driving all three of them deeper into the shallow cave. Thunder boomed, and they flinched in unison—a strangely human moment shared between predator and prey.*

The cave barely fit them. Each pressed against a different section of wall, maintaining maximum possible distance while the wind howled past the entrance. Ekanem's hand found his mother's amulet, clutching it like an anchor. Through lightning flashes, he studied his companions: Beleku, trying so hard to appear harmless despite his blood-stained appearance, and the Egbere, its small form radiating enough menace to fill the cave.

*'If I run, I could die alone. If I stay, I'm with potential killers—yet they just saved me'* Ekanem thought to himself, he felt like he had no other choice than to stay.

Their breaths came in visible puffs as the temperature dropped. The storm had trapped them together, forcing a temporary peace none of them had chosen. Water dripped steadily from their clothes, and occasional shivers betrayed their shared vulnerability to the cold

Thunder cracked overhead. Rain drove sideways into the cave, forcing them deeper into shelter. No one spoke. Water pooled around their feet, marking territories none dared cross. The Egbere made small, inhuman sounds, its attention darting between them like a trapped animal's.

Eventually, the storm's fury eased. Rain drummed a steady rhythm on stone. Their breath fogged in the growing cold, and exhaustion began creeping in. Beleku seemed to listen for something beyond the rain.

Soon, the storm departed, but it left behind a chilling cold.

## ***Unfamiliar Alliances: A/An Mis/Understanding***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ekanem shivered, his wet clothes clinging uncomfortably. He had gathered some kindling from Imomotimi's hut, he hoped it was still dry in his sac. The thought of fire warred with his instinct to keep still, to remain unnoticed. Another violent shiver decided for him.

Slowly, he reached down into the sac. The Egbere's red eyes snapped to the movement, its massive scaled hands tensing. Ekanem withdrew the kindling bundle, and two dry pieces of wood, holding it up where both could see. Beleku's eyes lit with understanding. Without speaking, he reached into his own bag, producing a piece of flint.

They worked in silence. Ekanem arranged the kindling while Beleku struck sparks. The Egbere watched, making irritated clicking sounds each time a spark failed to catch. Finally, a tiny flame took hold. They fed it carefully, the shared task creating a bubble of focused calm.

The fire cast dancing shadows on the cave walls, its warmth drawing them slightly closer despite their wariness. Beleku reached into his wrap, movements deliberately slow, and withdrew a small cloth bundle. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing strips of dried meat. With exaggerated gestures, he extended a piece toward Ekanem.

He held it out, palm up, the gesture deliberate. Ekanem was touched by the gesture, but shook his head. He had his own food. He reached into his sac and broke off a piece. As he chewed it, he remembered the toddler from Ajo-Ala, perhaps these were the companions the toddler had spoken of.

He reached back into the sac to retrieve the wrap of eko, intending to offer some, but his fingers brushed against Imomotimi's gourd as he reached for his own food wrap, the touch sending an electric reminder of the old woman and his first night in her hut.

He continued for the eko broke off another piece from the wrap with trembling fingers, offering it as Beleku had done. Beleku hesitated, but then accepted the food. He also broke some off for the Egbere, the creature did not collect it, so, he placed it close to the creature.

They ate in silence broken only by the fire's pop and crack. The Egbere watched them with undisguised interest, its scaled fingers drumming against its knee. The simple act of sharing food seemed to shift something in the cave's atmosphere. Beleku's shoulders relaxed slightly. Ekanem found himself studying the strange mat on the man's back rather than planning escape routes.

His hand strayed to the gourd again. The blind woman's words echoed in his mind: "Boy-child of sorrow..." The cave's chill seemed to deepen despite the fire. With sudden decision, he withdrew the gourd, its surface smooth and cool against his palms.

The Egbere's head snapped toward it immediately. Beleku's eyes narrowed, but he remained still. Ekanem mimed drinking, then held it out.

Ekanem uncorked it slowly, the sound loud in the cave's quiet. He lifted it in offering, and the Egbere moved with startling speed, snatching the gourd and drinking deeply before anyone could react.

The Egbere moved with startling speed, snatching the gourd. Before anyone could react, it had taken a long drink. It passed the gourd to Beleku, who studied it suspiciously before taking his own sip.

"Gods' teeth, this tastes like rotten egusi," Beleku muttered in Yoruba, wiping his mouth. "Was hoping the idiot had palmwine, but this...", unaware of Ekanem's widening eyes.

"It wasn't meant to taste good," Ekanem replied, his voice quiet but clear. Beleku jerked as if struck, nearly dropping the gourd.

"You... you understand me?" Beleku stammered. "This whole time?"

"He only understands you now because of the water," the Egbere's voice cut in, its tone dripping with sarcasm. Both Ekanem and Beleku were startled at the sound, Ekanem scrambling backward until he hit the cave wall. The creature's massive hands gestured dismissively. "Oh, stop it! If I wanted to hurt you, you'd already be bleeding."

"Wait... both of you? I can understand both of you now?" A laugh burst from him, tinged with something like relief. "Days of walking with this little demon, trying to guess what it has been muttering about..."

"If you had anything interesting to say, I might have tried harder to communicate," the Egbere's voice cut in. Ekanem stuck to the wall, watching Beleku who just seemed comfortably familiar with the creature's demeanor.

Beleku glanced at Ekanem, "It's okay, you can relax, he will not hurt you," he gestured to Ekanem to come back to the fire, "...and neither will I."

He studied the gourd with renewed interest. "But this... this changes things. What is it?"

Before Ekanem could respond, the Egbere clicked its tongue. "It's [magical name], water from the springs of [heaven place]. Where all tongues are made." Its red eyes fixed on Ekanem. "Though how a lost boy came by such a treasure... fascinating, where did you get it?"

"It..." Ekanem started softly, his voice barely audible over the rustling leaves as he looked away into the forest, "...it was a gift."

"From who?" Beleku followed up, "Who gave it to you?"

Ekanem did not respond. The firelight caught the tears welling in his eyes before he could turn away. Beleku's expression softened with understanding.

"They died, didn't they?"

The question broke something in Ekanem. His shoulders began to shake, tears flowing freely now. The gourd slipped from Beleku's fingers as he moved to the boy's side, one hand awkwardly patting his shoulder.

After a moment, Beleku's voice came gentle but probing: "Was it the bandits?"

Ekanem's continued silence was answer enough. The Egbere shifted, its scaled hands moving to its blade. "Don't worry about them," it said, voice cold with satisfaction. "Those bandits will never be a problem to anyone ever again."

Ekanem jerked away from Beleku's touch, pressing himself against the cave wall. His eyes, wide with fresh terror, fixed on the blood still visible on the Egbere's blade.

"Back off," Beleku snapped at the Egbere, shifting to place himself between it and Ekanem. "Can't you see you're frightening him?"

The Egbere tilted its head, red eyes gleaming. "Frightening him? I just assured him his enemies are dead. Isn't that comforting?" Its scaled hands stroked the blade almost lovingly. "Humans. So squeamish about necessary violence."

Beleku kept his voice low and steady, like someone calming a spooked animal.  
"What is your name?"

"My... my name is Ekanem" he responded, his eyes fixated on the Egbere.

"Ekanem," he found Ekanem's gaze with his face, "Ekanem, look at me. Not at it. Look at me." He waited until Ekanem's terrified gaze met his. "Whatever happened with the bandits, whatever brought you here; that's the past. Right now, you're safe."

A harsh laugh from the Egbere. "Safe? With a blood-covered stranger and a creature from nightmares? Your definition of safety is interesting."

"Not. Helping." Beleku glared at the creature before turning back to Ekanem. "The little terror has an awful way of putting things, but it's not wrong about one thing -

"we're not your enemies. Those bandits..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Whatever they did to you, they deserved what they got."

Ekanem's voice came out barely above a whisper. "Did they? Did anyone deserve..." He gestured weakly at the bloodstains still visible on both his companions.

The Egberé stood suddenly, its small form somehow filling the cave with menace. "Yes. They did. I've walked these lands for centuries, boy. I've seen what humans do to each other. Those men? They weren't just bandits. They were slave traders."

Beleku's sharp intake of breath matched Ekanem's. "Okay fine, you were right. They got exactly what they deserved. But the boy..."

"But the blood..." Ekanem's eyes remained fixed on the stains.

"Blood washes away," Beleku said softly. "The things they would have done...the things they do to people—those leave marks that never fade." His hand moved unconsciously to his neck, where Ekanem noticed for the first time the faint scar of an iron collar.

The Egberé made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl. "This is touching, truly. But perhaps instead of crying about spilled blood, we should discuss how a boy carrying [magical name] and an amulet of Ajo-ala ended up in slave traders' hands?" Its red eyes fixed on Ekanem with unsettling intensity, pointing at Ekanem's hand. "I know what you're holding... That's not the kind of thing one simply stumbles across."

"This is touching, truly. But perhaps instead of crying about spilled blood, we should discuss how a boy carrying [magical name] and an amulet of Ajo-ala ended up in slave traders' hands?" The Egberé's red eyes fixed on Ekanem with unsettling intensity, pointing at Ekanem's hand. "I know what you're holding... That's not the kind of thing one simply stumbles across."

"I could say the same thing about you," Beleku interjected, his voice hardening. The firelight caught his face as he turned toward the creature. "How did you get here, and what about that mat of yours?"

The Egbere's entire demeanor changed in an instant. Its scaled hands clenched, amulets rattling at its waist as it spun to face Beleku. "Which you will give me back!" The words came out as a snarl, all pretense of civility vanishing. The creature's hair bristled, making its small frame seem larger, more menacing. "You have no right to keep what isn't yours!"

Beleku raised his hands, but his voice remained firm. "And you had no right to follow me for three days without explaining why it's so important." He glanced at the mat secured to his back. "Besides, if it's as precious as you claim, why haven't you simply taken it? We both know you're capable."

The Egbere's red eyes flashed dangerously, but something like uncertainty crossed its features. Its massive hands flexed and unflexed, the scales catching the firelight. "I... cannot." The admission seemed to pain it. "Not without..." It stopped, those weeping eyes darting to Ekanem, then back to Beleku.

The tension in the cave thickened. Ekanem found himself clutching both the amulet and the gourd, suddenly unsure whether these were the companions the toddler from Ajo-ala had been referring to. Through the cave's entrance, he could see the storm clouds breaking, revealing the first hints of pre-dawn light.

"I don't know either of you," Ekanem said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "And truthfully, you terrify me." His eyes flickered to the Egbere's blade, then to Beleku's mat. "But I'm lost, and I need help." He took a deep breath. "I'm trying to reach Oritameje."

The effect was immediate. Beleku's face drained of color, while the Egbere went perfectly still. The silence that followed felt heavier than the storm had been.

"Oritameje?" Beleku's voice was gentle, almost pitying. "How do you know of that place?"

Something in his tone made Ekanem's stomach clench. "I... I need to find it. Someone I know..."

"I'm sorry," Beleku cut in, shaking his head slowly. "If you knew anyone in Oritameje, they're probably dead. The Omi kingdom raided it a few days ago. Nothing left but ashes now."

The words hit Ekanem like a physical blow. His legs gave out, and he slid down the cave wall to the ground. Oritameje had been more than a destination—it had been hope itself. A chance to find Abebi's village, to make sense of everything that had happened. Now it was gone, like everything else.

The first light of dawn crept into the cave, painting the walls in shades of purple and gray. But for Ekanem, the world had never felt darker.

// *Anansi: The boy cannot seem to catch a break, can he. It's unfortunate that Beleku was his source of information, because Oritameje had bounced back right after the battle.*

## ***Unquiet Mornings***

### **[NEW CHAPTER – Needs work]**

Ekanem woke to the sound of Beleku gasping for breath.

Before fully rising, he watched Beleku thrash on the makeshift bed of leaves. Veins bulged across the man's forearms and neck, as though something inside him wanted to burst free. He clutched the cursed silver mat tightly, the mat faintly glowing in the predawn gloom.

Beleku began to grunt loudly.

"Beleku," Ekanem whispered, moving closer. A flicker of movement in the branches above reminded him that the Egberé was also watching. "Beleku, it's just a dream. Wake up."

Beleku jerked upright. For a split second, his eyes seemed unfocused, feral, he swung widely, barely missing Ekanem's face—then he recognized Ekanem's voice. He exhaled shakily, forehead glistening with sweat.

"Another nightmare," Beleku muttered, voice raw. He glanced around as if still expecting an attack. "I'm sorry... I—"

"You're okay," Ekanem said. He managed a reassuring nod, though his heart still pounded. Beleku's haunted expression unsettled him almost as much as the forest's creeping silence. "You called for help in your sleep."

High above, the Egberé stirred. It crouched on a broad branch, red eyes half-lidded with feigned disinterest. "Such nightmares," it mused. "One would think humans would be used to their own terrors by now."

Ekanem ignored the remark, turning back to Beleku. "We should move on soon. I've been thinking..." His voice wavered. "I want to go to Oritameje—even though you said it was destroyed."

"You heard what I said. It was overrun." Beleku pulled himself to his feet, wincing at an unseen ache in his muscles. "What do you want with Oritameje anyway? You can't even speak the language."

"I can now," Ekanem insisted, "Look, Oritameje is a crossroads for merchants. It can't be completely gone. Maybe the raiders only did partial damage. People might've fled. Maybe survivors need help."

"And what if there are no survivors?" Beleku resecured the mat, eyes distant. "What if the only things waiting there are bones and ashes?"

"Then at least I'll know," Ekanem said. "I've been wandering in these forests for too long, and I know the same is true for you."

While Beleku did not reply, he contemplated it for a second before dismissing the thought. "I have nothing to return to there. Even if a piece of the city survived the battle, it will not survive the next, and unless you have an army, I suggest you find a new destination."

They set off, Beleku picking a path through the undergrowth. The Egbere followed, moving branch to branch overhead. The forest grew denser as they walked, forcing them to duck under low-hanging vines and step over twisted roots.

Beleku stopped abruptly, frowning at a cluster of trees.

"This is where we cut you free," he said to Ekanem. "The ropes should be right..." His voice trailed off.

The ropes lay scattered on the ground, but the tree they'd bound Ekanem to was gone. Not cut down or uprooted—simply absent, as if it had never existed. The earth where it should have stood was unmarked, covered in undisturbed leaves.

"This isn't right," he muttered. "The tree—the tree you were tied to should be here somewhere, but it's... gone."

Ekanem circled the empty space, trying to make sense of it. "Maybe we took a wrong turn?"

Beleku began to search around for clues.

"It cannot be, there was a path near the tree, there's no path here either." he pointed at where the path should have been, "But, how did the ropes get here?" he followed up.

"No, there was a large rock," Beleku pointed at a nearby rock, voice tight. "I also marked the path." He touched a nearby trunk where a deep slash should have been. The bark was smooth, unbroken.

"Memory plays such strange tricks," the Egbere mused from above them. "Especially when one travels with... unreliable companions." It shifted on its branch, red eyes fixed on Beleku's mat. "Those who take what isn't theirs often lead others astray."

Ekanem's throat constricted as he looked around the clearing again. Something was deeply wrong here – not just the missing tree, but the very air felt different. The forest sounds had changed, becoming unfamiliar, alien. "What is this place?" he whispered, more to himself than the others. "Where are we really?"

While Beleku methodically circled the area, examining every trunk and stone like pieces of a puzzle to be solved, Ekanem found himself backing away from the empty space where the tree should have been.

"The forest remembers," the Egbere mused from above, its voice carrying an undercurrent of dark amusement. "Or perhaps it forgets. Who can say which is worse?" Its red eyes gleamed as it watched Ekanem's growing discomfort.

"This doesn't make sense," Beleku muttered, crouching to examine the scattered ropes. "The markings, the path, the tree – everything was here yesterday. Unless..." He trailed off, lost in thought.

"Unless what?" Ekanem asked, his voice sharper than intended.

Beleku shook his head. "We should keep moving." But Ekanem noticed how his grip on the silver mat tightened. Following Beleku started to feel... wrong.

As darkness fell, they made camp in a small clearing that seemed somehow more solid, more real than their surroundings. Yet even here, Ekanem couldn't shake the feeling that the forest was watching them, waiting.

Later, while Beleku slept fitfully, the Egberé drifted closer to where Ekanem sat. Its voice dropped to a whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"You know he's lying to you," it said. "About the mat. About why he keeps it." A pause. "About what happened in Oritameje."

Ekanem tried to ignore it, but the words settled like poison in his mind. "You're just trying to—

"To what? To warn you?" The creature's laugh was bitter as unripe fruit. "I've watched humans long enough to know a desperate man when I see one. And he..." It gestured at Beleku's sleeping form. "He reeks of desperation. Besides, doesn't he seem like he is being led by dark forces beyond his own control?"

"Look at his hands," the Egberé whispered, nodding toward Beleku's sleeping form. "See how they never quite leave the mat? Even in sleep?"

Ekanem had noticed. The silver fabric seemed to ripple occasionally, like water catching moonlight, and each time it did, Beleku's fingers would twitch.

The Egberé continued, its voice almost gentle now, like a mother warning a child of danger. "Maybe you should ask yourself who—or what—is truly leading you through these woods." It paused, watching the mat's silvery shimmer.

"It's your mat, why don't you just take it back from him?" Ekanem asked.

The Egberé's scaled hands flexed, a gesture so quick Ekanem almost missed it. "The mat cannot simply be reclaimed by the original bearer... neither can the bearer be harmed by the original owner," it said, each word precise and bitter. "An... inconvenient rule, wouldn't you agree?" Its red eyes narrowed. "But rules can be bent, if not broken. I've seen it before. I've seen what happens when humans try to bear divine burdens, like that mat. It changes people, and not always for the better."

The Egbere's scaled hands flexed, a gesture so quick Ekanem almost missed it. "The mat cannot simply be reclaimed by the original bearer... neither can the bearer be harmed by the original owner," it said, each word precise and bitter, as it reverted to crying in a low, hushed tone to avoid waking Beleku.

"This makes me his prisoner, you see." Its voice grew softer, more vulnerable. "But you... you can claim the mat and hand it back to me, to free me from my burden."

Ekanem shook his head, but the Egbere pressed on, its red eyes gleaming with sudden insight. "You said you lost someone very dear to you? I imagine you got that gourd of the fountain of tongues from them?" It tilted its head, studying him. "When they died, they became a spirit, like me... but of a different kind, of course. Imagine if someone stole their dignity and ability to exist in peace. Would you not help them?"

The creature's words struck something deep within Ekanem. His mother's face flashed in his mind, so did Imomotimi, their final moments replaying like a nightmare he couldn't escape.

"If you help me, I promise to get you to Oritameje." The Egbere's voice became honeyed, enticing. Ekanem found himself taking a step forward, then another. But something made him hesitate.

The Egbere, sensing his wavering resolve, played its final card. "If you do it, I can reunite you with your lost one. Was it your mother?" it purred, "Wouldn't you like to have one last conversation with her?"

The words hit Ekanem like a physical blow. In one fluid motion, he drew Beleku's blade and pointed it at the Egbere, his hand trembling but his grip firm. The creature's eyes widened, not with fear but with something darker—anticipation.

The sound of steel leaving leather snapped Beleku awake. His eyes took in the scene in an instant, and real fear crossed his face.

"Ekanem," he said, voice urgent but controlled, "please give me the weapon." He slowly rose, hands raised. "Step behind me. Now."

As Ekanem handed the weapon to Beleku, moonlight revealed a faint shimmer beneath Beleku's skin—silvery threads, like mercury, pulsing outward from where the mat touched him.

"I apologize," the Egberé said, its voice heavy. "Using your family was... beneath me." It turned to Beleku, scaled hands clenching. "But this madman has refused to return what is truly mine, and look at him—he's losing himself to it. You see it too, don't you, boy?"

"But look at your protector. The mat feeds on him, thread by thread, night by night. You've seen how he mutters to it in his sleep?"

Beleku's jaw tightened, but he said nothing as he secured the blade. They spent the rest of the night in tense silence.

## ***The Fragment***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

By morning, when Ekanem mentioned the night's events, Beleku looked at him strangely. "What blade?" he asked, adjusting the mat on his shoulder. "I slept through the night." His eyes were clear, honest—and that terrified Ekanem more than any lie could have.

The Egberé watched from above, its expression unreadable. Eventually, they emerged into a small clearing ringed by spindly trees. The air felt stale, thick with the scent of rotting leaves and something sweeter, more cloying.

When Ekanem looked at the surrounding forest, the trees seemed to shift positions when he blinked, like dancers frozen between steps. He pointed this out to Beleku.

"This place..." Beleku muttered, wiping sweat from his brow. Silver droplets clung to his hand, catching the light. "We should keep moving."

But Ekanem's mounting dread finally broke through. He stepped in front of Beleku, noting how the mat's edge curled toward him like a hungry tongue. "You keep talking about leaving the forest, but we only seem to be going deeper into the stranger parts of this forest," he said, voice trembling. "It's that mat causing half our problems, isn't it? The Egberé keeps insisting it belongs to him. So just—just give it back!"

The Egberé bared its needle-sharp teeth in a smile that stretched too wide for its face. "Yes, give it back. Why cling to what writhes against your very flesh? See what happens to your *problems*."

Beleku's grip tightened on the mat, and Ekanem swore he heard it sigh. "I told you," Beleku said, his voice layered with an echo that wasn't quite his own. "I *can't* give it back. Not yet."

The Egbere moved closer, its claws leaving smoking furrows in the earth. "Or you *won't*. Humans grasp at power and profit like drowning men at floating debris. You do not cherish or respect the sanctity of life, not even of each other... as long as there is power and profit."

"You welcome spirits and gods so long as you profit from them—an amulet for luck, a charm for healing, a blessing for harvest. Once that's done, you cast us aside, call us monsters, drive us out with torches. You even do the same to your own kind. Don't pretend otherwise. Even your precious orisha are revered for what they can give you or do for you, not for what they truly are."

Beleku resecured the mat, cutting off the Egbere's tirade. "We're wasting daylight," he said flatly. Then he looked at Ekanem. "If you truly want to see Oritameje, I won't stop you. Go whatever direction you want, I will continue my own search." He pressed a palm against his brow

Small flowers burst from the ground around them, bloomed, and died in rapid succession. Ekanem's patience snapped with them. "Is that it, Beleku? You want to keep this thing because you think it grants you power? You'd risk all our lives?"

Beleku looked at him, and for a moment, his eyes held the same metallic sheen as the mat. "You *know* that's not true. I only took it from the Egbere because—" He stopped, shuddering as silver lines traced patterns across his neck.

The Egbere's nostrils flared, releasing thin streams of darkness. "Go on, *explain*," it spat. "Tell him how you justify theft."

Beleku refused to look at the creature. Instead, he focused on Ekanem, voice ragged. "You saw how those men died. You saw the mat's glow when I tried to defend us—and how the Egbere used its... *powers* to kill. When I first touched it, I felt something latch onto me, like a thousand tiny hooks under my skin."

Ekanem's breath caught. "What are you saying?"

"That I'm *bound* to it," Beleku whispered. "Some curse or contract—call it what you will. I can't just hand it over."

Ekanem's gaze darted to the Egberes. Its expression was unreadable, but it said nothing in its own defense.

"So you're stuck with it," Ekanem murmured. "And we're stuck with you."

Beleku nodded grimly. "Yes, for now."

"And if you're lying?" Ekanem demanded, stepping forward. His heart pounded with the memory of the bandits' blood. "What if you're just hoarding it for yourself? If you won't give me a real reason—then I'll take it from you in your sleep. I'll return it to the Egberes myself."

Beleku's eyes burned with alarm. He shook his head, voice dropping to a near-whisper. "Ekanem, if you do that..." He locked gazes with the younger man, the mat slipping an inch off his shoulder. Silver lines pulsed beneath his skin like trapped lightning. "If you do that, then you might as well sever the cords of our spirits with a knife."

Ekanem recoiled, terror lodging in his throat. His wide eyes flickered to the Egberes, who stared back in unsettling silence. He did not know what to believe or do anymore. He definitely couldn't just wander off alone.

They continued walking till they reached a place where silk-cotton trees rose like pillars, their buttress roots forming natural archways. The air felt different here, heavier, "onyā-hene," Ekanem remarked.

As he crossed beneath them, the energy shifted, and for the first time since he left Imomotimi's, the amulet pulsed.

His hand went to his neck, fingers finding the familiar warmth of the amulet. Strange, he hadn't felt its weight until now, had almost forgotten it hung there.

He considered bringing it out, but he hesitated and continued walking, but the amulet continued to pulse as he walked. He touched it again, then, it stopped, he wasn't sure if this was a warning or an encouragement.

He eventually spoke up, "I think I might have a solution," he said, he then removed the rope hanging around his neck, slowly revealing the amulet. When he did, a breeze blew through the trees.

The Egberes red eyes fixed on the amulet, its scaled hands flexing involuntarily. All pretense of disinterest vanished. "Where did you get that?" it demanded, voice sharp with recognition.

Ekanem instinctively drew back, closing his fingers around the amulet. The silk-cotton trees creaked above them, their shadows seeming to lean closer.

"You know what this is?" Ekanem asked, watching the creature carefully. Even Beleku had gone still. The Egberes moved forward, then caught itself, claws leaving marks in the earth.

"That amulet," it said, each word precise, measured. "The fragment, no, no. Where did you get it!" It tilted its head, studying Ekanem with new intensity. "You've seen them, haven't you? The spirits of the forest?"

"I wonder what this one does?" The Egberes muttered, curiously regarding the amulet, trying to steal looks at it from behind Ekanems hand.

A distant crack echoed through the tree —perhaps a branch falling. Ekanem quickly tucked the amulet back under his clothes. The shadows had lengthened while they talked, darkness creeping between the trees.

"We need to find shelter," Beleku said, scanning the dimming forest. "Not here though. These roots..." He trailed off, studying the twisted shapes of the silk-cotton trees. "We should move on."

They found a small hollow formed by fallen logs, far enough from the silk-cotton grove that the air felt lighter. As Beleku arranged branches for cover, the Egberes perched above them, unusually quiet. Finally, it spoke.

"Please," it said, voice lacking its usual edge. "Let me see the amulet again. I promise you... I have no more lies to tell, no tricks, no ill-intention." It looked at Beleku. "You can watch me. Both of you."

Beleku studied the creature for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Your choice, Ekanem."

Ekanem hesitated, then drew out the amulet again. This time, holding it close to his chest with both hands. Revealing it before the fire for the Egbere to see. It lay cold and still in his palm, nothing like the pulsing warmth he'd felt earlier.

"Ah," the Egbere breathed, climbing down to their level. "Just as I thought. It's not working, is it?"

"What do you mean?" Ekanem asked, turning the amulet over in his hands. In the firelight, its surface was dull, unremarkable.

The Egbere settled on a fallen log, red eyes fixed on the amulet. "The spirits you've been seeking guidance from - you can't see them anymore, can you?"

Ekanem's head snapped up, "What spirits? I've only been guided by fireflies... not spirits."

"Fireflies?" Then, clarity dawned on him, "Those... they are not fireflies," it said calmly, "Let me show you. I can show you."

"But I'll need something first." It pointed at the the sac on Ekanem's waist. "May I? An empty calabash."

Beleku shifted, one hand moving to his blade. "What are you planning?"

"A gift," the Egbere said simply. "Insight and clarity, freely given. They'll let you see what I see." It turned back to Ekanem. "Unless you'd rather stumble blind through these woods?"

The hollow seemed to grow smaller as Ekanem weighed his choices. Finally, he took out the calabash and held it out. As the Egbere reached for it, its scaled fingers brushed Ekanem's hand - cool and dry, like old leather.

"Watch closely," it said, "and I'll show you what the forest really is."

## ***Ekun Egberé***

### **[NEW CHAPTER – Needs work]**

The Egberé took the calabash, its movements suddenly ceremonial. All of a sudden, its eyes welled up. When it spoke, its voice carried surreal tone reminiscent of divinity and nostalgia in one:

*"Before the fracturing of the divine calabash,  
When Orun and Aye were but one vessel,  
All beings walked the paths between realms freely,  
Like water flowing through a gourd's narrow neck.*

*As the Alagbase, we tended cosmic tides,  
Where souls and spirits crossed the hallowed bridge,  
While great Asuwada kept his solemn watch,  
Balancing forces in their ancient dance.*

*But we who glimpsed forbidden truths in silver shards,  
Watched reality splinter, watched worlds run dry.  
Now realms both bleed and drift forever apart,  
While mortals stumble blind through fractured paths.*

*Now, Orisha and Ajogun walk separate paths,  
The realms both bleed into one another and stand forever apart  
These mats we bear, woven from cosmic thread,  
burn with the weight of our eternal shame.*

*Each tear that falls carries a fragment's gleam—  
Of perfect order that we failed to keep.  
These tears we shed are borne not of mortal sorrow,  
But eternal regret for what was lost and broke.*

*Take these tears, child of two worlds,  
child marked by mother's grace  
See through eyes that death could not dim,  
See the beauty we failed to preserve,*

*Take these tears, unwilling seeker of death,  
soul judged by mortal fears,  
Find truth in what the darkness claims...  
Witness the pain we cannot contain...*

As the Egberes' tears filled the calabash, they caught the firelight like liquid silver. When the creature finished, silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the soft sounds of the forest night.

"Wash your eyes," the Egberes whispered. "See what was—"

"How did you know that?" Ekanem interrupted, "Child of two worlds, marked by mother's grace... where did you hear that from?"

The Egberes without looking up responded, "I've been blinded by my arrogance. Oh. How I failed to see... there was a prophecy, not long after the shattering..." it stopped, "None of that matters now. Please wash, you will be able to see for yourself."

Beleku went first, cupping the tears and bringing them to his face. His sharp intake of breath made Ekanem eager to follow. What did he see?

Heart pounding, he followed Beleku's example and scooped the eerie fluid, dabbing it across his eyes. At once, the air around him seemed to hum. The darkness lifted like a veil, revealing glimmers of soft light drifting through the clearing.

## ***They are the forest***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

The forest transformed around them - every leaf, every branch suddenly alive with awareness. The trees themselves breathe, their bark rippling with consciousness.

When they looked up, faces peered down from towering heights, ancient and aware. The trees watched, and on their branches, all sorts of entities, interacted with each other, speaking in languages that neither Beleku nor Ekanem understood.

"Why can't I understand?" Beleku asked, puzzled, "Did the effects of the water wear off?"

The Egberie replied, "You drank from the fountain of tongues of this realm, not theirs, you will not understand each other."

Ekanem felt the amulet grow warm against his skin. Looking down, he saw a partial symbol glowing on its surface - one he'd never noticed before. Something stirred in his memory.

"The Toddler..." he whispered. "Ajo-ala... the companions... they are the companions."

The Egberie opened its scaled palm, revealing the missing half of the symbol. "You begin to remember," it said softly. "The mark of those who walk between."

For the first time since meeting the creature, Ekanem felt no hesitation. He removed the amulet and placed it in the Egberie's waiting hand. The creature produced a small rod and began to carve, completing the symbol—a double-sided gourd calabash, the shape of infinity, infinite in its flowing lines, in the center of the loops, it drew strange symbols that Ekanem could not understand.

The completed amulet rose into the air, blazing with inner light before floating back to Ekanem. As his fingers closed around it, song burst from the direction of the Araba trees—pure notes that made his heart ache with their beauty.

Hundreds of sprites graced the sky, their blue and gold forms illuminating the night sky like falling stars. They danced through the air, eyes glowing like living fireflies.

"The fireflies...!" Ekanem exclaimed in wonder.

Except they *weren't* insects. Ekanem gasped, realizing they were winged silhouettes—sprites. The sprites swooped down, circling them in playful spirals, each glowing with blue light, and in their eyes, the golden hue that he had mistaken for fireflies.

In the distance, the trees rose like slumbering giants, their branches bending and swaying with gentle, purposeful motion. Spirits of every shape and hue emerged to join the celebration, riding the walking trees like grand chariots through the transformed woods.

"Look there," Beleku murmured, his voice thick with awe.

Spindly figures perched along the boughs—more forest spirits trading goods, conversing in soft murmurs. The trees themselves had carved faces half-hidden in the bark, eyes half-lidded yet undeniably aware.

"They were in the forest all along," Ekanem whispered, goosebumps prickling across his arms.

"They *are* the forest," the Egberé corrected, its tone only slightly smug. The tears still glistening on its own cheeks. "And now you can see it," under its voice, it whispered, '*There's a cost for knowledge. Let's hope you don't regret it.*'

Overhead, luminous blobs flitted from branch to branch. Even Beleku wore an expression of quiet astonishment, though he kept a wary hand on the silver mat, as though it might react to all this magic at any moment.

For a long moment, none of them spoke. The forest—alive with hidden beings—sang its gentle chorus of rustling leaves and distant whispers. Ekanem felt both humbled and afraid. He stood side by side with a cursed man and a bitter spirit in a realm far more alive than he'd ever imagined.

The Egberé slunk along behind them, occasionally hissing at a spirit that drew too close. “Don’t stare too long,” it warned under its breath. “Some of these would as soon lead you off a cliff as help you.”

Following the sprites’ lead, they walked through this new realm of wonder. But as they traveled, Ekanem noticed the sprites beginning to depart, one by one, like stars fading before dawn.

“What’s happening?” Ekanem asked, knuckles whitening around his amulet. “Are we losing the effect of the tears?”

Beleku looked at him, brow furrowed. “I don’t know. I can still see *some* of them...” He paused. “But not as many.”

“Mm,” the Egberé grunted. “I see it, too. Something is chasing them away.” A strange hiss laced its voice—a note of anxiety, perhaps. “Stay close.”

The forest grew darker with each departure, shadows deepening where spirit-light had danced moments before.

Then, from somewhere within the remaining swirls of light, a guttural howl rumbled—not the voice of any natural beast, but something that made the very air curdle. The remaining sprites in the distance scattered like startled fish, and the forest was dark again.

“What was that?” Ekanem questioned, his hand flying to the amulet. Around them, the carved faces in the trees were disappearing, bark smoothing over as if they’d never existed. “The tears, I think they dried.”

"No." The Egberes voice was tight, its red eyes scanning the darkness. "It's not the tears. Something else is here with us in the forest."

A sound like breaking branches echoed through the trees, followed by footfalls. When they turned toward the noise, they caught only a glimpse of Beleku's back as he fled into the darkness.

## ***The Corrupted of Omi***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

They found Beleku leaning against a tree, breathing hard. When they approached, he held up a hand to ward them off.

"Don't follow me," he said. "This is who I am—one marked by death itself. I'm already a dead man."

"The dead do not walk, and the living do not rot. The dead do not rise to administer death to the living." the Egbere's voice cut through the darkness.

"If you're already a dead man as you say," The Egbere responded as it inched closer "why didn't you just wait?"

Beleku's laugh was hollow. "Because every time I cheat death, others die in my stead. People, animals—" His voice cracked. "You haven't seen what I've seen. Each time I escape death, it claims another life. If you stay with me, one of you will die."

"...because Orun will eventually come to collect," the Egbere finished softly. "The universe always seeks balance. But if you're not dead yet, perhaps it was never your time to begin with?" It sought Beleku's eyes. "After all, the god of balance has gone mad."

"What do you mean by that?" Ekanem asked, "How can a god go mad?"

"It... means nothing. Ignore me." The Egbere waved a scaled hand dismissively, then, it turned to Beleku again, "But know this—I've encountered others who've cheated death before. It's never pretty, but your case..." It studied Beleku intently. "I do not thin you are correct, this... is different."

"Different how?"

"You're under Oshosi's protection. All this time in the forests, yet not a single creature has attacked you, they even guide you, heal you."

"But, the boar—" Beleku started.

"Was not meant to harm you," the Egbere interrupted, looking down. "It was to stop you from giving me the mat." It paused, "An orisha would not protect one marked by the Ajogun."

Then, they heard it again, footsteps echoing through the trees, closer now. Beleku's face drained.

"They're coming," he whispered.

"Who?"

"The Omi..." Beleku replied.

Ekanem's hand found the amulet. "Omi soldiers? But there's no light, no horses—"

"No, no, not those..." he swallowed, "These, these aren't the regular soldiers," Beleku's voice was barely audible. "These ones are meant to be... to be dead. They're the reason I had to leave Oritameje."

Ekanem's eyes darted around, when he suddenly caught sight of a tall, slender being crouching on a branch. He jolted back, almost screaming—a figure with leafy hair and luminous eyesockets and beetle-black eyes.

It was watching far ahead, then, it looked down at the trio of travelers, seeing they had noticed it, it stood, ready to swing, when the Egbere called out to it in a language the humans did not understand.

The entity hesitated. The Egbere climbed up the tree and began conversing with it. It pointed ahead and then said a final sentence before swinging off, disappearing into the shadows.

Moments later, the Egbere reappeared, dropping from the branches with effortless grace. It began in a low voice low. "One of the Long-Necks saw movement—Corrupted foot-soldiers from the Omi kingdom. That's what broke the gathering from earlier. They've been wandering across all the forests... it said they mostly..."

"It said they mostly hunt humans. They're up ahead." it finished, its gaze turning to Beleku, who immediately responded, "We need to go, now!"

The Egbere stopped them, "Wait, how did you know? You knew ahead of time."

Beleku replied, "I recognized the howl... I've come across them before. They killed my friend..." he shook his head, correcting himself, "...scouting partner."

They heard a plant snap and Beleku bolted, they followed suit.

"But you said, 'The dead do not walk, and the living do not rot. The dead do not rise to administer death to the living.'" Ekanem questioned the Egbere.

"There is a first time for everything. I may have been alive for centuries, but I haven't seen it all," The Egbere suddenly stopped, "Here. We can hide till they wander past us."

Beleku stopped to look, a sufficiently dense bush, he nodded. They all shuffled into it.

The Corrupted walked till they reached them, then, they slowed down and began lurking around. The Egbere remarked, "They're searching for something—or *someone*. We need to backtrack."

But from behind them came a crackle of snapping foliage. Ekanem felt the hairs on his arms stand on end as he heard the slow shuffle of footsteps. Then, into a faint shaft of moonlight, a figure lurched—clad in ragged armor, arrows lodged in its neck and a broken spear jutting from its biceps. Pale, unfocused eyes flicked across the clearing.

At the sight of them, the Corrupted soldier emitted a ragged scream—a sound that made Ekanem's stomach clench. Instantly, more moans and howls answered from the darkness.

"Run!" Beleku barked.

They bolted, tearing through the undergrowth. Ekanem clutched his amulet as though it might guide his feet, while Beleku kept the mat tight under one arm. The Egberes bounded alongside them, leaping over roots and fallen logs. Behind them, the Corrupted's screams rose, echoing through the trees and scattering whatever forest spirits remained.

In their panic, Ekanem glimpsed flashes of gold light swooping overhead—some of the blue and gold sprites still lingered, swirling around as if to help or at least *warn* them where to turn. Their faint glimmer carved a path through the labyrinth of branches. Ekanem focused on that glow, heart pounding, lungs burning.

A root caught his foot. He stumbled and nearly fell, but Beleku yanked him upright by the collar. “Keep going!”

Dozens of rotting silhouettes appeared through the gloom, limbs jerking unnaturally, weapons clutched in half-decayed hands. Another pained cry pierced the night, and Ekanem’s mind reeled with terror.

Then the ground vanished beneath his feet.

They tumbled forward, crashing into a concealed pit. Dirt crumbled around them as they slid along a steep, muddy slope. Ekanem lost all sense of direction, arms flailing, the amulet jostling against his chest. Beleku let out a startled shout. The Egberes hissed and snarled behind them.

*Thud.* They landed in a cramped hole, the walls slick with damp earth. Ekanem gasped, shaking off the disorientation. Beleku was sprawled beside him, the mat askew. The Egbere sprawled on its back, muttering curses in some guttural language.

Above, pale shapes scuttled near the pit’s edge—glimpses of the Corrupted’s limbs in the moonlight. Beleku wrapped his arms around the Egbere’s mouth to keep it quiet. But this turned out to be a bad idea, his skin sizzled as it came in contact with the Egbere’s caustic saliva.

Beleku held in the pain as his flesh melted. Ekanem held his breath as flecks of dirt rained down. If the creatures peered in, they could be trapped.

But, unbelievably, the Corrupted seemed unable—or unwilling—to climb down. Their moans drifted away as they lurched across the forest floor in search of other prey.

The three fugitives lay silent for a moment, hearts hammering. Then Beleku fell to the ground, straining and rolling in pain. The Egberé immediately took out a small container and poured the contents over Beleku's arms, healing him instantly. It then smashed the container, saying, "That was the rest of it," in a disappointed tone.

Both Beleku and Ekanem were perplexed, but there was no time to be wowed. Beleku immediately stood up and took stock of their surroundings. "Is this a pitfall trap?" he asked under his breath.

The Egberé's eyes narrowed. "No. Smells older than that. It's more like..." It sniffed, tilting its head. "A tunnel entrance. Something caved in long ago."

Ekanem strained to see in the dimness, grateful the tears' effect still lingered enough for him to discern some details. Sure enough, the pit opened into an underground passage. A faint draft of air brushed his cheek, suggesting there was a way out somewhere below ground.

"Let's go before those things come back with full force," Beleku whispered. He hoisted the mat and gestured to a narrow arch of stone and roots leading deeper underground.

Ekanem nodded, still trembling from the close call. He peered upward one last time, catching sight of faint lights—spirits circling overhead. Whether they were guiding or merely watching, he didn't know. *Thank you*, he thought, though it felt absurd to thank silent witnesses.

With Beleku in the lead, they navigated into the passage. It sloped downward at first, then leveled out. The air grew colder, and dripping water echoed in the

darkness. The walls were slick stone and twisted roots, forming an eerie, natural corridor.

“Keep your voice low,” the Egbere muttered. “Other things might call this place home.”

They inched forward for what felt like ages, stumbling over rubble and half-buried bones. Ekanem tried not to think about how easily they could get lost down here—or how many tunnels might split off in different directions. More than once, he thought he heard distant scraping, but nothing attacked.

Eventually, a faint glow ahead signaled another exit. They climbed toward a patch of pale moonlight, pushing through tangled vines until the tunnel opened into a new clearing. Beleku clambered out and collapsed on the grass, gasping in relief at the open air, the mat fell out of his hand, then, he immediately grabbed it with an unnatural quickness. He stood and was about to tie the mat on his back again.

Ekanem emerged next, observing the skin on Beleku’s back and neck looked like it had burned, but rather than charred black, it was silver. He was about to say something about it when The Egbere wriggled out after him, muttering about the discomfort of “human-sized spaces.” They all looked around, hearts still racing.

Beleku exhaled and slumped back down. “We made it,” he said, though his voice held no triumph. The forest had proven more dangerous than any of them had imagined.

The Egbere shot him a sidelong glance. “Yes... but where are we?” It stood up, brushing dirt from its fur-like garment. “We could be deeper in the forest than before.”

Ekanem stared at the clearing’s moonlit grass and felt an echo of the forest’s earlier magic prickling at the back of his mind. “I—I don’t know,” he admitted. “But at least we’re not stuck in that hole.”

## ***Deluge of air***

**[NEW CHAPTER - NEEDS SOME WORK, But is ready to be read]**

The clearing was broad and oddly serene—on one corner, tall grasses swayed in the gentle breeze, and the moon shone brighter here, free of the oppressive canopy. A solitary tree stood nearby, reminiscent of the same giant Araba tree Ekanem had seen on his way into Ajo-ala, but the trunk was narrower, branches twisted in a subtle spiral.

He touched his amulet, now strangely cool against his skin after its earlier brilliance. At least, for the moment, they were alive—and out of reach of the Corrupted.

"This tree..." He slowed, breath catching in his throat. "It looks just like the one I saw before."

Beleku threw him a wary glance. "The one you saw *where*?"

Ekanem's excitement dimmed as he spoke. "When I escaped after... after my village was attacked, I followed fireflies—sprites, like the ones we saw tonight—and they led me to a place called *Ajo-Ala*." His fingers traced the newly carved symbols on the amulet. "There was a great onyā-hene tree at its heart, wrapped in fog. I found help there."

"A *city* in the middle of the forest, hidden by fog?" Beleku's voice held equal parts confusion and concern.

"It wasn't just a city," Ekanem insisted. "It was... unreal. Spirits and illusions everywhere. But I left before I could learn more." He looked up at the looming canopy. "Now, seeing a similar tree—" He glanced at his companions. "I think you're the companions the spirit-child told me I would need."

The Egberé's red eyes fixed on the amulet again. "Ajo-Ala twice in one lifetime?" It gestured at the empty clearing. "The wandering city appears only when needed,

and I see no fog here." Its voice softened. "Though that explains much about your amulet—a fragment from the time before the shattering, like my mat."

Ekanem's shoulders slumped. Indeed, there was no sign of the white haze that had once pulled him into that dreamlike realm. The clearing was empty but for the whisper of wind through leaves.

Beleku glanced around uneasily. "Fog or not, we need to keep moving." He turned to Ekanem. "I'm... not saying you're lying, but it sounds impossible. Are you sure—"

"I have proof," Ekanem cut in. "The Eko you ate with me—that came from there."

The Egberé tilted its head. "You've truly been there." it sounded surprised. "But you weren't entirely truthful about the amulet—about getting it from your mother, you got it from Ajo-ala, didn't you?"

Ekanem bristled. "No, it *was* from my mother, but it wasn't hers to begin with. That's a long story... but I got it after she passed. That's how I got led to Ajo-Ala—the amulet guided me."

The Egberé opened its mouth to respond, but a rustle at the edge of the clearing silenced them all. This was followed by a laugh.

The laugh echoed from behind a bush —too high, too broken to be natural. As they backed away, a figure emerged: a man in tattered clothes, holding something that caught the moonlight. A reflective panel.

Where his eyes should have been, there were only dark hollows, yet he stared intently into the panel's surface. "Wa," he whispered, then louder: "horao... ihe pe lumeee!" The words sounded like they all came from a different group of people calling each all at once.

"Come closer, you all look like you have questions," he beckoned. "You need to seeeee. Everything you seeeeek - the answers are here, with meehee."

The Egberes claws dug into the earth. "Madman," it hissed. "Step back from him."

Beleku tried to reason with the stranger. "Is there a village nearby? We need help—"

"Whatever troubles you," the man interrupted, "this holds the solution." He tilted the panel, its surface rippling like disturbed water. "Just one look..."

"Is he lying?" Ekanem whispered.

The Egberes voice was grave. "It's... complicated. I've seen one of those before, but I never looked. Even my kind went mad looking into those panels."

Ekanem's hand went to his amulet. The back side had turned utterly black, pulsing in rhythm with the panel. "This amulet is a shard too, isn't it? Like his panel?" He held it up. "Maybe with its protection, I could look. I will look with one eye—"

The madman's head snapped toward them. "The shard," he breathed. "Yes... show me..."

Ekanem's eyes narrowed. "You want us to look so badly? Then trade—let me see your panel, and you can see the amulet."

Before anyone could stop him, Ekanem stepped forward, covering one of his eyes. As he got closer, the man quickly pointed the reflection at Ekanem's eyes to catch him unexpectedly, but the amulet blocked the reflection.

Ekanem grabbed onto the panel and stuck the black part of the amulet to the black side of the panel. A bright light shone from the panel, and the moment the light hit his eyes, he screamed—a sound of pure agony.

Suddenly, Beleku and the Egbere started hearing footsteps again. Through the tall grass, they saw them. The Corrupted had found them. They hadn't disappeared, they had simply taken the long route.

Ekanem snapped the amulet off and fell to the ground. The madman exploded with excitement, "What did you seeee?! Insight! Show meeee."

"Let me seeee—" he asked, but stopped mid-sentence when he saw the Corrupted. Intrigued, he began to approach them. As he did, Ekanem began to crawl back towards to Beleku.

When he saw this, he began to scream, "Give meee the amulet! GIVE ME THE AMULET!" he shrieked as the undead soldiers seized him. "GIVE ME THE AMULET!" His laughter turned maniacal as they dragged him away.

Beleku scooped up the still-writhing Ekanem and ran. Through his pain, Ekanem managed to gasp, "I—know the way... I can see where we have to go," he began to direct Beleku as they ran, gasping directions until they reached a stone well.

"Jump," he croaked. "We have to jump."

"No, no, no. I'm not jumping in there." Beleku replied, dropping Ekanem with his back to the well wall.

"Look at the sky... look at the moon." Beleku and the Egbere looked, and it was a blood red moon. None of them had noticed this before.

"This is why the spirits celebrated tonight, isn't it?" he questioned the Egbere.  
"I do not know all of their cultures, but they celebrate some things around the cycles of the moon, yes."

"We have to jump now, or we are all going to die here!" he yelled with urgency.

The Egbere sprang to action, examining the well's edge. "Test it first. Drop something, but don't look down."

They listened. No plop, no echo. Just an eerie silence that seemed to go on forever.

"Nothing," Beleku whispered. "It's bottomless?"

The Egbere peered into the darkness, ears twitching. "More likely a portal or a break in reality. We can't stay here."

Sounds of snapping wood and rattling bones were getting louder—shapes converging on them through the moonlit underbrush. Ekanem's pulse thundered. "We have no choice! We jump."

Beleku hesitated, gripping the mat tighter. "What if—"

"Quick—join hands!" Ekanem instructed. "We must hold hands or we'll be scattered when we cross."

Beleku shoved aside his fear, gripped Ekanem's wrist, and reached for the Egbere's clawed hand. Together they stepped up to the edge. Another shrill howl rent the air as the first of the Corrupted loomed behind them.

They jumped.

For a breathless instant, Ekanem felt weightless. The mat on Beleku's shoulder flared with bright, silvery light. The Egbere's eyes went wide—let out a startled yelp. For the first time since its fateful meeting with Beleku, it could touch the mat. Its clawed hand released Ekanem's grabbing for the mat instead.

Then, the world spun. Ekanem was ripped from Beleku's grasp. Sensation tore through him—vertigo, rushing wind, and a harsh burst of light that eclipsed all else.

He plunged into the dark, overwhelmed by a deluge of air, unable to see, unsure whether he was falling forever or being cast into another realm entirely.

# Chapter 9: Aigbofa l'an woke

## *Silent Oracles in the Sacred Grove*

### [NEW CHAPTER]

The grove was shrouded in the golden haze of dawn. Mist wove through the roots of ancient iroko trees, clinging to the ground. Ifakolapo knelt on the damp earth, his opele<sup>6</sup> chain spread before him. Each link in the chain glinted faintly in the pale light, holding the promise of answers—or the dread of more questions.

Before him lay two offerings: a palm kernel, smooth and brown, taken from Adigun's farm (Iyalode's son), and a handful of dried corn kernels from Oyeniran's withering farm (Ifakolapo's friend). The weight of their plight bore down on him. He clenched his fists, trying to steady his trembling hands. He had to help them. He had to try.

The air was still, thick with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. Closing his eyes, he whispered a prayer, the words catching in his throat.

"Agbó máa sáyé o, agbó máa sáyé òrun, bí a kò bá mò ní, ó jé kí a mò."

("Let the earth speak, let the heavens speak, and if we do not know the truth, let it be revealed.")

Taking a deep breath, he cast the opele.

The kernels struck the earth with a soft rattle, fanning out into a pattern. Ifakolapo leaned closer, his heart hammering in his chest. At first, the signs seemed promising—a gentle arc symbolizing resilience, a symbol of growth emerging alongside it. But then, as he studied the pattern, the lines began to blur.

A shadow seemed to creep into the reading. His breath hitched as a new symbol emerged, spreading like cracks in dry earth. It was corruption.

---

<sup>6</sup> Opele: Kernel chain used in Ifa divination

The sight jolted him, bringing back memories he had tried to bury. Beleku's trial. The same shadow had appeared in the opele chain then, swirling with foreboding. He had stood before the King's court, clutching the chain, unable to interpret what it meant. Soil or soul, he had said, and his uncertainty had condemned Beleku.

The first cast spoke of *Oyeku Meji* – complete darkness, void, absence. His breath caught. He cast again. *Iwori Meji* – transformation, but twisted somehow. The signs began to blur before his eyes, just as they had that day in court. Where there should have been clarity, he found only shadow. Something was wrong with the soil or soul, but it was more than natural rot. The corruption felt...conscious.

Now, that same shadow loomed before him, but this time it wasn't Beleku's life at stake. It was Morenike's. Oyeniran's. His own.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. He cast the chain again, his movements frantic. The opele landed, forming a new pattern, but the corruption remained. It spread through the signs.

His mind flashed back to that day in court. This was his first divination since that day.

A twig snapped nearby – early farmers heading to their fields. Ifakolapo quickly gathered his materials, but not before one final cast. The pattern made him freeze: *Osa Meji* – identical to the pattern he'd seen during Beleku's trial, the one he'd been too afraid to interpret honestly. His hands shook as he packed away his things.

But as he turned to leave, his gaze fell on the ground. The corrupted pattern remained etched in the soil. He stood there for a moment, staring at it. Then, with a shuddering breath, he turned and walked away, the mist swallowing his retreating figure.

On his way back to his compound, he came across Bose who was carrying a small basket of herbs into Baba Ajao's compound. She always seemed to be where he needed her, especially when it involved Morenike.

"Bose," he called softly, "I have a message for your friend."

The little girl brightened at his approach. She was young, but she understood the delicate dance between him and Morenike— the relationship that some called an open secret, she treated as a sacred trust.

"Tell her to meet me by the [?. add description] after the sun peaks. Say I have read the signs." He hesitated, then added, "Tell her it's about the palm trees."

After watching Bose disappear into the compound, he made his way to Oyeniran's compound. The morning was still cool, the compound quiet except for a woman grinding peppers. He recognized her as Oyeniran's father's youngest wife.

"Don't wake him," Ifakolapo said, knowing his friend's habit of working late into the night. "Just tell him to meet me at the market after noon. About the corn."

She nodded, her eyes showing the worry they all felt about the withering fields.

As he walked away, the weight of what he'd seen pressed down on him. The signs suggested something beyond natural decay, beyond simple crop failure. But how could he trust his reading? The last time he'd seen signs this unclear, his fear had condemned an innocent man. Now, with his closest friends' futures in the balance, the same fear threatened to blind him again. He had to come clean.

## **Rendezvous on the Verdant**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ifakolapo stood atop the knoll, the grass cool against his ankles, as he observed the early bustle of Oritameje's market below. From this height, the scenes of daily life unfurled like a woven tapestry: women in bright wrappers arranging their palm baskets, children weaving between stalls, and farmers with bent backs delivering their morning harvest—albeit smaller than usual. The steady stream of traders and buyers moved with familiar purpose, their voices rising in a chorus of greetings and bargaining.

Yet despite the ordinary rhythm of market life, an unease gnawed at him. This morning's opele cast had revealed something sinister—a corruption creeping beneath the surface of their community, spreading through their lives like an unseen rot. He'd chosen this familiar vantage point hoping to steady himself, but now the distant hum of commerce and laughter struck him as unnervingly hollow.

He lowered himself onto the grass and, for a moment, closed his eyes. The weight of sleepless nights pressed against his temples, and the distant market sounds began to blur, mixing with the rustle of leaves above him, he felt his limbs get heavy and soon, he drifted off to sleep.

As exhaustion pulled him under, the world tilted, shadows lengthening behind his closed eyes. In his brief sleep, fragments of the Trial of Beleku which he longed to forget merged with new visions. Then, suddenly he found himself standing in a farm clearing.

Before his eyes, the lush cassava leaves withered to black decay, while sinister laughter echoed from àkàlà birds. He turned, only to see a dark bird diving straight for his face. As its beak struck his left eye, he jerked awake.

As he sat pondering the vision, warm hands suddenly covered his eyes from behind, pulling him from his thoughts. He stiffened, instinctively reaching for the blade tucked at his waist, but a familiar voice broke through the tension.

"Ifakolapo," the voice said, followed by that familiar scent of herbs and palm oil. "Morenike," Ifakolapo replied as she dropped her bundle by his side, her eyes scanning his face, then, she turned to face him fully.

"What is troubling you? Your eyes have that same distance they have had since the battle."

"Now that you're here, all is fine with me and the world." Ifakolapo smiled, his lips tight. As he drew her in for an embrace, the smile vanished. Over her shoulder, his eyes fixed on something that made his blood run cold—a black flower blooming beneath a tree, its petals unfurling like smoke in still air.

Morenike felt him stiffen in their embrace. When she pulled back, she caught the fear flickering across his face before he could mask it. Her hand found his, squeezing gently. "What is it?" she questioned, following his gaze to the tree.

Kolapo broke his stare, then pointed, but when he looked again, the flower was gone. "Nothing," he said, too quickly. "I thought I saw something under that tree." He drew a deep breath, let out a deep sigh and continued, "Let's just wait for Oyeniran."

She frowned, studying the way his shoulders remained tense, how his eyes kept darting back to that spot. "You know what my mother always says—'A trouble shared is like bitter herbs in soup; it may not taste sweet, but it brings healing.'" She unwrapped her bundle to reveal: roasted yam slices and a small calabash of water. "But first, eat," she offered. "You've not eaten well in days, I can tell. You can tell me about what worries you as you eat."

He looked over the yams and shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

The silence stretched between them. She had watched him retreat into himself over the past few days, and though she had tried to hold her tongue, the words now spilled forth: "Ifakolapo," she said, her gentle reproach unmistakable. "You're still terrible at hiding when you're brooding... Why won't you talk to me?"

When he remained silent, she drew a deep breath. "Before my father embarked on the campaign to besiege Orande," she continued, her voice softening with memory, "he would sit at the back of the compound staring at the Òrúrù tree (African tulip tree) in the backyard—it was a such a beautiful tree. But he regarded it with anger, and would look distressed everytime he returned into the house." she said, staring into the grass.

"Nobody really knows what he saw at the tree, but one day, he suddenly took an axe to it. My mother tried endlessly to get him to tell us what was going on, but he refused. Long story short, his life was saved only because my mother went to your father for a divination..." She paused, her fingers tracing patterns in the grass. "That was when it was revealed that if the war party had left on their chosen day, they would have all perished to adversities in the forests before reaching their destination."

Her eyes met his, gentle but unwavering. "You are an Awo, you are the one I come to for divination, so I cannot do what my mother did. Will you please share what is troubling you? Maybe I can help some other way."

Ifakolapo reached for her hand, pressing it gently. "Morenike—" he began, but the words died in his throat as Oyeniran's arrival brought both relief and an unspoken regret.

"You picked quite the meeting spot," Oyeniran remarked, his usual grin straining against obvious exhaustion as he placed down a sac of seeds.

"What did you see, Ifakolapo? Have the gods spoken?" he sat on the sac. His wrapper and facial marks were stained with the red earth of his farm – he'd clearly been working since dawn.

He noticed the tension between Morenike and Ifakolapo, "What is going on with the love birds today? Are you not enjoying your secret spot, cause I like it here?" his eyes darting around the verdant.

"It's not a secret spot. The whole village knows we meet here," Morenike smirked.

"Yes, and we also let you two pretend we don't." he added.

Morenike replied, but Ifakolapo barely heard their exchange. His mind had drifted off, he considered lying to his friends about his visions and the divination, but then, his mind went to another moment, when he'd failed to speak truth in time. He snapped back and saw they were waiting for him to speak.

"The signs..." he began, his voice distant. "They're like scattered cowries in muddy water. Clear enough to see, but when I reach for their meaning..." He pressed his fingers to his temples. "Something is interfering with the readings. But what I can see—" He straightened, his expression hardening. "The rot in your brother's farm," he continued, cutting through. "It's not natural. And Oyeniran, your corn—the withering isn't from poor soil or the weather. But I see no solution either—no recommended sacrifice and no Orisha to pacify. It's like I'm not getting the full picture."

Oyeniran's grin faded as he settled on the grass beside them. "What did you see in the signs?"

"Oyeku Meji first – darkness rising from below. Then Iwori Meji, but twisted somehow. Like water turning against its nature." Ifakolapo's hands moved as he spoke, tracing the patterns in the air. "Something is corrupting the land itself, starting from the neighboring village's direction."

Darkness rising from below. Then Iwori Meji, but twisted somehow. Like water turning against its nature." Ifakolapo's hands moved as he spoke, tracing the patterns in the air. "Something is corrupting the land itself. There was a pattern on the ground when I finished... it pointed in the direction of Ijimo."

"Ijimo?" Oyeniran cut in, "...that lies just beyond where my corn started dying." He paused, his face darkening. "And Ijimo is the last village before you reach Igbo territory."

Morenike's hands stilled in her lap. "The stranger... Alaka," she whispered. "The one offering iwofa service to my mother... he is from Ijimo. But surely—"

"Wait," Oyeniran continued, his voice dropping lower. "Didn't Igbode just complete their annual sacrifice? The one where they..." He trailed off, noticing how Ifakolapo's shoulders had tensed.

"Can we not talk about that?" Ifakolapo cut in sharply.

"But the timing fits," Morenike pressed gently her instincts pushing her past his discomfort. "You said it yourself—the corruption is coming from that direction. And everyone knows Igbode's priests deal in darker practices than mere animal sacrifice. You know the tension that lies between us and them."

Ifakolapo's expression hardened as memories threatened to surface. After a long moment, he spoke, his voice tight: "There are some corruptions that can only come from blood rituals gone wrong. Or worse—gone right."

"So it is the Igbode people?!" Oyeniran's words hung in the air like smoke.

Ifakolapo's fingers traced the worn leather of his diviner's bag, his silence heavy with unspoken doubts. "The signs are..." he began, then shook his head. "I cannot be certain."

"Cannot be certain?" Oyeniran's laugh was sharp and brittle. "Since when do the gods speak in whispers to their chosen ones?"

"It's not that simple," Ifakolapo said, his voice tight. The morning breeze carried the scent of decay from the valley below, a reminder of what was at stake. "The corruption I see in the signs—it's like looking at ripples in muddy water. The pattern is there, but something distorts it."

Morenike watched him, noting the shadows under his eyes, the tension in his shoulders. "What else?" she pressed gently. "There's more troubling you than unclear signs."

Ifakolapo's hand stilled on his diviner's bag. "The darkness in the readings," he said finally, each word measured as if it cost him something. "It reminds me of Beleku."

The name fell between them like a stone into still water. Oyeniran straightened, his earlier frustration sharpening into focus. "Beleku? The traitor? What could he have to do with dying crops?"

"I don't know yet, but there is a mysterious connection." Ifakolapo followed.

"We need answers, Ifakolapo, not more mysteries. You're the one who's supposed to see these things clearly." he continued, then he burst into laughter.

"Look..." he grabbed the sac of seeds. "This is the second time I have had to replant seeds. Less than a quarter of my seedlings are sprouting." Oyeniran's voice sharpened. "What do you mean you don't know what is happening? Your final initiation is in two days. If you can't see clearly now; maybe I should go see your father inst—"

"How dare you?" Ifakolapo eose, his voice Kaiden with anger and disappointment in his friend's lack of understanding.

"Enough! Both of you." Morenike voice cut into the suddenly brewing tension.

"If I could tell you more, I would," Ifakolapo shot back. "Do you think I want this? To watch you both suffer and feel powerless to help?"

Oyeniran [cowered?] "I'm sorry... I'm just really frustrated, and when I received your invite, I thought you finally had a solution to my problem."

"You saw something like this before, didn't you?" Morenike's tone quieted but intensified. "Back when Beleku stood trial."

Oyeniran's eyes widened. "Are you saying—"

"I'm saying I don't know," Ifakolapo interrupted, his voice raw. "But whatever's happening now—it feels the same. And if we don't figure it out, it won't stop with your farms, it will spread."

The three fell into an uneasy silence, the hum of the marketplace rising faintly from below. Morenike's gaze drifted to the valley, her thoughts written plainly on

her face. "If it's spreading," she murmured, "then it's not just us. The whole village could be at risk."

"I need your help finding a root cause, then, we can try to find a solution." Ifakolapo said, taking his seat again.

After a few moments of silence, Oyeniran spoke, "I heard Beleku disappeared into thin air during the attack."

"I think the village has always treated him too harshly," Morenike replied softly. "Blaming him for things..." she trailed off. "The things that happened to his family... they weren't his fault. There are forces around us that we don't understand."

"Yamayama ni gbogbo iyen jere. He should have been executed!" Oyeniran's voice rose. "He betrayed his fellow Ode and more importantly, the village!"

Ifakolapo stared at the ground, considering what Morenike had just said in conjunction with the results of the divination he got today. 'What if I was wrong?'

Morenike tapped his shoulder. "Oyeniran is asking how he got away."

Ifakolapo blinked, pulling himself back to the present. "Nobody knows. After the battle, they realized he was missing."

"Doesn't that sound like a guilty spy to you?" Oyeniran pressed. "He sold the village out to the Omi kingdom." His eyes suddenly lit up. "Wait—what if the Omi Kingdom is working with Igbede? Think about it. They're the next major kingdom in the vicinity. We get attacked and they don't," he rose.

He began pacing, his words tumbling out faster. "The rot started around when Beleku returned to the village. What if he brought a charm from there? From an alliance of enemies. They're attacking us physically and spiritually! The enemies must have freed him after he killed Olujide. It makes sense—Olujide must have discovered the conspiracy, and Beleku killed him to silence him!"

Morenike thought aloud. "Why would he return to the village to report the incoming threat of the Omi soldiers and risk execution then?"

Oyeniran hesitated. "To plant the charm, to be a distraction, maybe it was all part of their plan. I don't know, but it makes sense to me."

"These things are usually simpler than that." Morenike added, "Maybe he came to get something. Or maybe he simply came to gloat."

"Exactly!" Oyeniran grabbed the two sacs of seeds from the ground. "I have to go jere, my father is getting on my nerves today. These seeds won't plant themselves." He strode away, leaving them with his dark theories hanging in the air.

After Oyeniran's departure, the silence between them grew thick with unspoken words. Morenike stood perfectly still, her usual gentle presence hardened by realization.

"What is it?" Ifakolapo asked, though something in him already knew.

"You lied to me." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "About Beleku's trial. When I asked you about his divination, you told me he was guilty, that you read the signs clearly."

Ifakolapo flinched, as if her words had physically struck him. The memory of that conversation, held in the golden light of a fading afternoon much like this one, rushed back to him. He had been so eager to put the trial behind him, to bask in the glow of his perceived success, that he had buried his doubts deep within himself.

"It's not that simple," he protested, but the words sounded hollow even to his own ears, like a child's feeble excuse in the face of a parent's knowing gaze.

Morenike's expression softened, but her eyes remained steady on his. "Of course not," she agreed, her tone gentle yet laced with a quiet firmness. "If it were that simple, you would have understood today's divination clearly. And if you don't understand it now..." She met his eyes. "You never did then either, did you?"

"Morenike—"

"No." She cut through his protest. "I remember that day. We all praised your insight." Her eyes searched his face. "But you're wearing the same look now as you did the next day."

"He was guilty! He is guilty, wherever he may be!" Ifakolapo burst out, his voice cracking with the force of his conviction. A passing woman glanced at them curiously before hurrying on. He lowered his voice, but the intensity remained, simmering beneath the surface. "He had Olujide's finger and lock of hair in his possession. You heard Oyeniran's theory about Omi Kingdom and Igboede's involvement. Does—"

"There's always a plausible explanation for every mystery that is just as plausible as the truth. Those are your words." she shook her head.

"You were the one who taught me to seek the truth that lies beneath the surface... Or do you not believe in your own words anymore my love?" she knelt before him.

Something crumbled in him then, like a mask long worn finally falling away. "If this explanation is not the truth, then tell me what is? Tell me... Tell me why you care so much about this alakori!" the cadence of his voice rising with each word.

Morenike moved closer, her hands rising to frame his face, and as she was about to speak, he turned to face her, his eyes welled up and tears rolled down his cheeks. She had never seen him cry before.

"Oh, Ifakolapo," she whispered, her heart aching at the sight of his tears. Her thumb brushed away a tear that rolled over the bridge of his nose. "I care, not for Beleku's sake, but because I know you. If it had been a mouse on trial. I would still care... because of what is in here." she placed her hand on his chest.

Ifakolapo felt the fight drain out of him, leaving behind a bone-deep weariness. He fell to his knees next to her, "What would you have had me say to the court?" His voice broke. "That I, the son of the great Ifagbemi, am too dull and useless couldn't to perform a simple divination clearly? That I was as lost in the signs as a child in the forest at night?"

He leaned into her touch, letting her strength flow through him, steadying the trembling of his spirit. "I haven't told anyone else of my doubts... of my fears, and the restlessness in my soul," he confessed, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I see visions in the daytime, and my nights are haunted by nightmares."

Morenike's eyes widened, a flicker of concern passing over her features. She drew him closer, her forehead pressing gently against his. "These visions, these dreams... they are messages, Ifakolapo. The gods are trying to speak to you."

He shook his head, a shudder running through him. "But what are they trying to say? I don't understand. I feel lost, Morenike."

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, her hands still cupping his face. "You are not lost, this is a journey... your journey, shaping you into the man, the Babalawo you are destined to become."

Ifakolapo swallowed hard, wanting desperately to believe her. "But what if I'm not strong enough? What if I fail?"

"You will not, you have a gift that you are only just starting to unravel. Trust in that, in yourself"

She paused, her thumb tracing the line of his cheekbone. "And trust in those who love you. Those who believe in you." she placed her other hand on her chest.

Ifakolapo felt a warmth bloom in his chest, a flicker of hope amidst the stormy sea that had been threatening to consume him. Morenike's faith in him was a beacon, guiding him back to shore.

They sat in silence for a long moment, staring at each other, the bustle of the marketplace fading into the background. Finally, Morenike spoke again, her voice soft but insistent.

"You need to go talk to him," she said, her gaze finding his eyes once more. "You need to see your father."

At the mention of his father, Ifakolapo immediately averted his gaze and withdrew his hand from hers. "No. No, no!" he shook his head violently, his voice trembling. "He wouldn't care enough to even listen..."

"He hates me," he said flatly, then paused. "You didn't see the way he looked at me the day he returned, after the trial," a bitter laugh escaping his lips.

"Maybe he knew the truth about my divination, or maybe it was just his usual loathsome regard for me... but I know it was the latter. How would he know the truth? He never even bothered to do a confirmatory reading himself."

Morenike started to speak, but Ifakolapo cut her off, his words tumbling out in a rush, as if a dam had finally burst within him. "I went by his hut that evening, after the verdict was announced. As always, he was hosting guests, holding court like the great man he is." His tone was bitter, mocking. "I overheard them talking, congratulating him on his son's supposed wisdom and skill. Do you want to know what his response was?"

He paused, drawing a shuddering breath. "He said, 'The boy got lucky. Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while.' And then he laughed, Morenike. Laughed, as if my success was some kind of cosmic joke."

Morenike felt anger rise within her, hot and fierce. How could a father be so cruel, so dismissive of his own son's accomplishments? But she pushed it down, knowing that her outrage would do little to heal the wounds that had been festering in Ifakolapo's heart for so long.

"He's wrong," she said firmly, her hands finding his once more. "You are not lucky, Ifakolapo. You are gifted. The gods have chosen you, have blessed you with a wisdom and insight that few possess. Your father's blindness to that truth is his failing, not yours."

Ifakolapo shook his head, but she could see the flicker of hope in his eyes, the desperate longing to believe her words. "I've tried so hard," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the hum of the marketplace. "I've studied, I've trained, I've done everything I can to prove myself worthy of his legacy. But nothing is ever

enough..." he turned to look at Morenike and a sad realization stabbed at his heart, "And why wouldn't he hate me, I killed the love of his life afterall."

"You did not kill your mother," Morenike said fiercely, her grip on his hands tightening. "She gave her life to bring you into this world, Ifakolapo. That is a gift, not a burden. And if your father cannot see that... he is no great man, in fact, he is no man at all."

She leaned forward, resting her forehead against his. "You are enough," she whispered, willing him to believe it. "No matter what happens with your initiation or what your father says, I will always stand by you."

Ifakolapo closed his eyes, letting her words wash over him like a soothing balm. "Thank you," he murmured, his voice raw with emotion. "For seeing me, even when I fail to see myself."

Despite the many truths Morenike had spoken that day, one rang clearer than the rest: he needed to see his father. As much as he dreaded the idea, he knew his father was the only one who could help him face his current challenge.

## ***Unspoken Burdens***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Ifakolapo approached his father's shrine, his heart heavy with the weight of his confession. The words he had rehearsed countless times seemed to stick in his throat as he entered the sacred space.

Ifagbemi looked up from his divination tools, his eyes narrowing at the sight of his son. "What brings you here at this hour?"

Ifakolapo took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Father, I need to speak with you. Something is going terribly wrong—"

A sudden commotion at the entrance cut him off. A guard burst in, his face etched with urgency. "Babalawo Ifagbemi! News from the palace. Oluawo Ifatoyin has been sighted near the city walls."

Ifagbemi was stunned by the sudden outburst. "Ifatoyin?! Are you a madman? Ifatoyin died over a decade ago." his attention diverted.

"Baba mi. I am not mad, I saw him with my two eyes in the market yesterday." the guard knelt before Ifagbemi.

"If perhaps I have lost my mind. We cannot possibly say the same of the Kabiyesi. He was the one that sighted Oluawo Ifatoyin today, my lord."

Upon hearing this, Ifagbemi stood abruptly. "Are you certain?"

The guard nodded. "Multiple witnesses, Babalawo. The king has requested your presence immediately."

Ifakolapo watched helplessly as his father gathered his things, the moment for confession slipping away. "Father, please. I need to—"

"Not now, Ifakolapo," Ifagbemi dismissed, barely sparing him a glance. "This news of Ifatoyin takes precedence. We will speak later."

With that, he swept out of the shrine, leaving Ifakolapo alone with his unspoken truths.

---

Hours later, Ifakolapo made another attempt. He found his father in the outer chamber, preparing for the evening's divinations. "Father, about earlier. I really must speak with you."

Ifagbemi sighed, his patience wearing thin. "Ifakolapo, I have important guests coming. Traders and chiefs seeking guidance. I cannot be delayed by your trivial concerns."

"Father, please listen to me," Ifakolapo pleaded, his voice strained with urgency. "It's about the very essence of our role as Babalawos. About the truth we are sworn to uphold."

Ifagbemi's eyes flashed with anger. "I said enough!" His voice echoed through the chamber, silencing Ifakolapo. "What do you know about our sacred duties? You, who have barely begun to walk the path of the Babalawo?"

He stepped closer, his presence imposing. "You will respect my time and my position, Ifakolapo. Now, you can make yourself useful and prepare the shrine for our guests. Or you can disappear from my presence."

Ifakolapo felt the words like a physical blow. He bowed his head, the shame of his failure mingling with the sting of his father's rebuke. With heavy steps, he moved to prepare the shrine, his actions mechanical and numb.

As Ifakolapo worked, the murmurs of the arriving guests reached his ears, their voices low and laden with a sense of reverence and unease.

"Ifatoyin has returned," one man, named Bode whispered, his tone hushed. "After all these years, I thought him dead. Yet whispers of his presence spread like wildfire."

Another man, named Akinwumi spoke up, he was the youngest of the three, he looked stoic, but his voice betrayed the farcade. "He was more than just an Oluawo. A mage-priest, my father claimed that he was an emissary of the gods themselves." the man paused. "He used to claim that the Oluawo never died, that he would seen him in his sleep. No one believed him until one evening. We heard him scream in his sleep, and when we found him... he... his eyes had gone completely black... and he was dead. That's what brings me here today... I started dreaming too. I'm afraid I might end up like my father... Ifagbemi was his student, so, he's my one and only option. What brings you to Ifagbemi's counsel?" Akinwumi turned to the third guest, Murede, the first of the three to arrive and the oldest of them all.

Before the man could respond, Ifagbemi entered into the chamber, his presence commanding the room. The guests fell silent, their eyes fixed on the Babalawo. Ifakolapo gestured, and they all followed Ifagbemi into the inner shrine.

The inner shrine, softly illuminated by the warm glow of oil lamps, hummed with a quiet anticipation. An elderly man stood before Ifagbemi, worry etched into the deep lines of his face. His hands trembled slightly, betraying an inner anxiety that his composed demeanor struggled to conceal.

Ifakolapo lingered near the back of the room, careful to appear unobtrusive. His eyes were intent on his father, watching closely—determined to learn from this moment. This was a rare opportunity, as he had never worked directly with Ifagbemi since beginning his training.

Murede, sat in front of Ifagbemi, "Baba," he bowed respectfully, "Aboru aboye o."

Ifagbemi returned the bow and responded to the man before him, "Ogbo Ato Asure Ìwòrì Wofun," before briefly acknowledging Akinwumi.

"Akinwumi, I was sorry to hear about your father's passing," Ifagbemi began, with his characteristic raspy voice, "His role in the King's court will be missed."

His keen eyes subtly assessed the man's trembling hands. "I hope you will be able to fill his shoes..."

"Ese Baba, oju yin l'anwo" (Thank you, baba, it you we look up to for guidance) he bowed.

A pregnant silence filled the room until Ifagbemi broke it with a gentle inquiry.  
"How may I be of service to you today?"

Murede cleared his throat, "Baba, I come with a strange dream that plagues me, although, as it would appear... I seem to not be the only one afflicted by such strange visions" he turned around and glanced at Akinwunmi.

"In my dream, I saw my farmland, lush and full. I was carrying a sack heavy with cowries. But as I stood there, my crops began to wither before my eyes. I touched one of the plants, and it withered to dust in my hand. I then looked into my sack, once rich, turned hollow. The cowries were gone. Instead—" his voice faltered, "—instead, I found withered yams inside. At least, I thought them yams at first, until I looked closer. They were... limbs, human limbs, shriveled and twisted. I dropped them, horrified. Then arms burst from the soil and dragged me down beneath the earth. I awoke, drenched in sweat."

"Ahh, eèwò." Bode exclaimed loudly upon hearing the story.

"Strange are the paths the unseen tread. This matter must be handled with care," Ifagbemi said, then, he turned to the two remaining guests, his voice calm but firm.

"My sons, I ask that you wait in the outer chamber, I will call you in when it's your turn." Akinwunmi regarded Bode with a mild vexation as they both shuffled out of the room.

Ifagbemi asked Murede some clarifying questions about the dream, then, he also asked when the tremors started.

"Everything started going wrong after Ifatoyin returned," Murede said, raising his hand to his face, "Akinwunmi mentioned that he and his father have been seeing him in their dreams. Perhaps he has something to do with this?"

Ifagbemi frowned at the statement, "I will consult Ifa on your behalf. But be careful about leveling unfounded accusations against the servants of the Orisha so

accusations are not leveled against you before them." The opele chain rattled softly as Ifagbemi cast the chain. He studied the pattern, and frowned thoughtfully. Ifagbemi cast the chain again, his frown deepening, something wasn't adding up.

Ifakolapo watched closely, while unrelated to Murede, he couldn't help but notice the similarities between all three predicaments, so, he watched the patterns emerging, and sure enough, one of them showed up in his father's cast [?. ODU RESEARCH STILL NEEDED HERE, IGNORE FOR NOW].

At length, Ifagbemi gaze rose and he said, "I must consider this further. Kindly give me some time to reflect. Return at dawn and I will have clearer guidance for you."

As the man rose to depart, Ifakolapo cleared his throat softly. "Father," he began, voice low and respectful, "pardon my interruption, but... I think I see something."

Ifagbemi opened his eyes, eyebrows lifting slightly at his son's boldness. Murede turned his attention toward Ifakolapo. Ifagbemi hesitated, then, he finally replied, "Go ahead. Enlighten us on what you have to say"

Ifakolapo realized the implication of what he was about to do, so, he turned to Murede, "I have something to discuss with my father, please wait in the chamber, he will summon you in a moment."

The man's eyes met Ifagbemi's, and Ifagbemi nodded. The man disappeared into the chamber where whispers could be heard from the other guests inquiring about what had happened.

"Ifakolapo!" he called without looking up, "you have decided to linger... now, you interfere in my work, if you have something to say it and leave."

Ifakolapo swallowed, then approached cautiously. "Father," he began, voice steady, "the dream this man described... it reminds me of stories I've been hearing. Not only of nightmares but of actual rot in the farms."

"And Ifatoyin's return—some people seem to think he is the cause—"

"Ifatoyin was an Oluawo of this town, how dare you suggest that—" Ifagbemi cut him off.

"I agree with you." Ifakolapo defused, "He is not the cause. My investigations proved that this started before Ifatoyin even showed up, maybe he is not the cause. Perhaps he is a messenger, sent to guide our attention to these patterns. The corruption we fear is neither random nor isolated. It's connected—through dreams, through failed harvests, and now through these unsettling readings."

Ifagbemi turned slightly, his profile etched in lamp-lit shadow. There was a tension in his posture. He did not dismiss his son outright, as he might have done a season ago. Instead, he ran his fingers over the opele chain once more, as if measuring Ifakolapo's words against what he already suspected. "Go on," he said quietly.

"Father," Ifakolapo's voice steadied as he focused on the divination pattern. "The hands that pulled him down - they weren't human hands. The opele shows signs of something rising from below, corrupting the soil itself. I saw similar patterns in my divination this morning, but I need to consult your wisdom on this. Would you cast again?"

Ifagbemi studied his son for a moment, then cast the opele. The chain rattled against the mat. In the silence that followed, both men stared at the pattern.

"There!" Ifakolapo pointed, then caught himself, aware of his breach in protocol.

"And what exactly were you doing performing divinations this morning?" Ifagbemi's voice held its usual edge.

"Adigun and Oyeniran came seeking help. It is the duty of the Awo to provide help to those who seek guidance. Their crops..." Ifakolapo hesitated, weighing his next words. "Something is killing them from within, similar to what Murede just described... without the limbs of course."

"Unguided divinations are dangerous," Ifagbemi cut in, though something flickered in his expression. "You risk misreading crucial signs."

"I understand, father. But what I saw... the patterns pointed toward Ijimo, and—" Ifakolapo paused, then decided to risk it. "The corruption spreads in a pattern. Oyeniran's farm is decimated. Adigun's shows early signs. And now Murede dreams of hands reaching from below..."

Ifagbemi's fingers traced the pattern on the mat. "You believe these incidents are connected?"

"The signs align too precisely to be coincidence." Ifakolapo drew a slow breath. "Oyeniran mentioned something that troubled me. The corruption... it spreads from the direction of Ijimo, which borders—"

"Igbone territory," Ifagbemi finished, his voice going flat.

The air in the room thickened. Ifakolapo watched his father's face carefully. "You thought of something?"

"Our relationship with Igbone has been... complicated since the matter of the twins." Ifagbemi's gaze remained on the opele chain. "They practice older rites there. Darker ones."

Ifakolapo hesitated, then pressed forward. "I heard Ifatoyin was seen speaking with one of the twins, Abebi in the market square. About what, I wonder..."

A long silence followed. When Ifagbemi finally looked up, his expression had changed subtly. "I had wondered," he began softly, "if the patterns I'm seeing were coincidence. I saw hints after Beleku's trial, but I was... distracted. Now, as we stand on the threshold of something larger, your words give structure to my suspicions."

Ifakolapo was surprised, "You... you did your own divination?"

"Of course I did," Ifagbemi responded, frowning as though the question was disrespectful, then, he relaxed his face, "Although... I never finished it. Good job on your work, you have—" he paused, as though the words caught in his throat, "—made a lot of progress."

Rising, Ifagbemi straightened his shoulders. "Fetch the man," he said. "Let him return."

As Ifakolapo moved toward the door, his father added quietly, "And son... I will ask him about his farm. If the pattern holds true, we need to know."

The guest came back into the chamber, nervously twisting his fingers. Ifagbemi regarded him coolly. "I have reflected upon your dream and consulted with my apprentice. He has raised a most pertinent question: has the rot you see in your dream manifested in your farm?"

Ifakolapo's eyes shone widely, his father called him "My apprentice," and actually listened to him. A subtle smile creased the edges of his lips and his heart warmed.

Murede shook his head, "No... my farm is lush and green," he replied, "and that is where the problem lies... it means the dream might come true in some form. I have been hearing stories of farmers losing their harvests seemingly overnight, I can't help but be nervous that I am next."

"I will look into your matter more keenly, but in the meantime, we need to appease Òrìsà-Oko. Return tomorrow with: [?. add appeasement ritual items here]

After Murede's departure, the other guests came in for counsel—first Bode, then, Akinwunmi. Ifakolapo watched as his father transformed with each visitor. For Akinwunmi, his voice softened, offering comfort alongside divination as the man spoke of his ailing wife.

With Bode, his manner grew firm yet encouraging, like a steady hand guiding a lost child. Each consultation was a masterwork of both spiritual insight and human understanding.

It was here that Ifakolapo finally understood why the villagers spoke his father's name with such reverence. It wasn't just about his title or the accuracy of his divinations—it was how he held their fears and hopes with the same delicate care one might cradle a freshly kindled flame. His father was a star.

To the people, a shining beacon of light that they could turn to in their darkest moment and a light to look up to. Yet to his own blood, he remained as stars truly are—brilliant but distant, unreachable, burning bright for others while leaving his own home in a shadow.

As the last guest departed, Ifagbemi turned to his son, a rare smile softening his stern features. "You did well tonight," he said, his hand finding Ifakolapo's shoulder. "I see now that you have truly dedicated yourself to the path of the Babalawo."

Warmth bloomed in Ifakolapo's chest at these long-yearned-for words. "Thank you, father," he managed, his voice thick.

"Tomorrow, at your initiation, you will take your place among the Babalawos," Ifagbemi continued, his grip tightening briefly. "And afterwards, we will talk. There are things I should have said long ago."

Ifakolapo nodded, unable to speak. His eyes caught his Ide (bracelet worn by initiates). After all these years of seeking his father's approval, it seemed a door was finally opening between them. Distracted by the evening's events, Ifakolapo forgot what brought him to his father's doorstep in the first place: the lie.

## ***Gods of Justice – The Stranger***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Dawn painted the sky in shades of ash and copper as Ifakolapo made his way to the sacred grove for his initiation. His ceremonial robes, pristine white against his dark skin, caught the early morning breeze. Each step brought him closer to his destiny—or so he thought.

The air felt thick, heavy with more than just the promise of rain. Birds had fallen silent, and even the usually chattering monkeys in the canopy above held their peace. Nature itself seemed to be holding its breath.

"Ifakolapo."

The voice stopped him dead in his tracks. It came from everywhere at once, it was familiar yet strange, like an echo from a forgotten dream. He turned to find Ifatoyin sitting on a rock behind him, though he could have sworn there was no rock here, and there definitely was nobody a few moments ago.

The old Oluawo's hair caught the dim light like spun silver, his eyes dark. His simple brown robe bore no ornament. Ifakolapo had never met Ifatoyin, but this stranger definitely matched the description. When he stood, the anklet adorned with cowrie shells rattled, which all but confirmed Ifakolapo's suspicions.

"Follow me," Ifatoyin said, his voice sounded normal now.

"No. I have somewhere to be." Ifakolapo replied, irresolute.

"Your journey is different now."

Ifakolapo's hand instinctively went to the divination chain at his waist. "I cannot. My initiation—"

"—is not your path today." Ifatoyin's words cut through his protest like a blade through palm fronds. "Your path lies this way."

"People say you're the cause of our misfortunes," Ifakolapo said, voice tight with accusation. "The failing crops, the strange dreams—"

A smile played at the corners of Ifatoyin's mouth, but it held no warmth. "We both know those misfortunes were here long before I arrived." His eyes locked onto Ifakolapo's. "I wasn't here when Beleku stood trial, was I?"

The name hit Ifakolapo like a physical blow. He took a step back, then another, turning to flee toward the initiation grounds. But as he moved, Ifatoyin appeared before him once more.

Instinct took over. Ifakolapo's fingers traced the sacred symbols on his arm, speaking incantations that made his flesh translucent as morning mist. He stepped through Ifatoyin's form, materializing behind him with fluid grace.

"Nice trick," Ifatoyin's voice came from behind him.

Ifakolapo spun to find the old man there, hands already moving in complex patterns as he cast a spell that made the air itself grow thick as honey. Ifakolapo's limbs turned to stone, refusing to obey his commands.

From within his robes, Ifatoyin produced a small gourd, its surface covered in symbols that seemed to shift and dance in the dim light. He uncorked it and drew his thumb across the opening, then reached out to touch Ifakolapo's eyes.

The world shimmered, reality peeling back like bark from a dead tree. Behind it, a veil of mist formed, and through it—his mother.

"Maami?" The word escaped him as a broken whisper.

She stood there, beautiful and sad, tears streaming down her face as she waved to him. His heart clenched in his chest.

"She's waiting for you," Ifatoyin said softly. "If you do not listen to me now, you will be reunited with her before the moon hits the center of the sky."

Ifakolapo's voice trembled. "What are you doing here? What do you want from me?"

"I have returned for three reasons," Ifatoyin replied. "You are the second." He paused, looking up at the greying sky. "A storm is coming tonight. Listen well:

*'The tree that bears false fruit poisons its own roots,*

*While thunder sleeps in the clouds, waiting for truth.*

*What grows in darkness fears the lightning's eye,*

*But only the witness who speaks can truly die.'*"

The old man's eyes bore into him. "Solve this riddle before the storm breaks. Consult with the orisha if you must. If you are a just man and find its meaning, you will be spared. If not..." He gestured to the darkening sky. "The storm will take you, and you will not see the other side."

The paralysis broke, leaving Ifakolapo gasping. When he looked up, Ifatoyin was gone, leaving only the riddle echoing in his mind and the growing rumble of thunder in the distance.

The vision of his mother's face left him shaken, disoriented. Without thinking, his feet carried him to the sacred grove where he spent his mornings practicing divination. But today the grove felt different. Where usually the mist softened its edges, now shadows gathered thick between the trees, as if darkness itself was seeping up from the earth.

Ifakolapo knelt at his usual spot, perspiration running down his arms and torso. His trembling hands reached for the divination chain. "The tree that bears false fruit," he muttered, speaking the preparatory words before casting the chain on the Opon Ifa.

His breath caught. The pattern—it was the same as during Beleku's trial. He cast again quickly, trying to push that thought away, but the signs still spoke of judgment.

A sharp cry pierced his concentration. A black bird had landed on a nearby branch, its eyes fixed on him with unsettling intelligence. As he watched, it opened its beak

and let out a cry that sounded almost like laughter, then turned its head deliberately toward the Shigidi-Oke shrine.

His father. The thought knotted in his stomach. Ifagbemi was Ifatoyin's successor—who better to understand this riddle? And yet...

Last night's words echoed mockingly now: "my apprentice." One moment of approval after years of cold shoulders. Would his father even listen, now that he'd missed the initiation? Or would he find only the familiar disappointment, the old walls rebuilt?

But Ifatoyin's riddle left no choice. The initiation grove would be empty by now, his father at the Shigidi-Oke shrine. Whatever judgment awaited him there, he had to go.

Ifakolapo started towards the shrine, following a worn abandoned trail, wary of being seen by other members of the Awo. He both hoped that Ifatoyin would not stop him this time, but he also hoped the man would show up and explain that this was a simple case of awada gone wrong (prank). The trail ended at a grand courtyard flanked by carved wooden posts.

As he approached, the sound of voices drifted through the dense foliage. Instinctively, he ducked into the bushes, peering through the leaves at the two figures walking along the path.

"Where is Ifakolapo?" the first voice asked, tinged with exasperation. "Nobody knows... Ahh Oluawo is going to kill him. *Wan ma fi imu e fan fere.*" the other replied. "Did you see his eyes when he retreated to the shrine?" "Like Olukoso himself. I have never seen Oluawo like that before."

This was the initiation shrine, where earlier in the day, his formal ceremony had been set to conclude. In normal times, the place hummed with quiet reverence—today, an oppressive stillness weighed down the air, broken only by the distant crackle of thunder.

He made his way from here to the shrine, and sure enough, his father was there. He could recognize the unmistakable baritone of his father, Ifagbemi, but he couldn't make out what was being said.

He moved closer, keeping to the shadows of the towering iroko trees that flanked the shrine. The intricate carvings on the wooden posts seemed to watch him, their faces etched with a mix of curiosity and ancient wisdom. Ifakolapo's heart raced as he neared the shrine's entrance, the scent of burning herbs and the distant rumble of thunder filling the air.

Just as he was about to step into the courtyard, the voices drifted again from within. Ifakolapo froze. He inched closer, straining to hear the conversation.

"...and you're certain he hasn't been seen?" Ifagbemi's voice was low, tinged with a weariness that Ifakolapo had rarely heard before.

"No, Baba," came the reply, likely from one of Ifagbemi's assistants. "We've searched everywhere. It's as if he's vanished."

There was a heavy pause, followed by a sigh from Ifagbemi. "Perhaps it's for the best. The boy has always been a disappointment, a living reminder of my own failings. Sometimes I wonder if the gods are punishing me through him."

Ifakolapo's breath caught in his throat. The world seemed to tilt beneath his feet.

"Baba, surely you don't mean that," the assistant said, his voice hesitant.

"Mean it?" Ifagbemi's laugh was bitter. "The gods cursed me twice over with that boy. First taking his mother, then leaving me with a pale shadow of what a son should be. The only thing he is reliable at is being a disappointment..."

The words hit like physical blows. Ifakolapo stumbled backward, bile rising in his throat. Last night's memory mocked him now—"my apprentice," his father had called him, had looked at him with pride. What a fool he'd been to believe anything had changed. His father continued to speak, but he had heard enough.

*A tree that bears false fruit poisons its own roots.* The riddle's words took on new meaning as tears burned in his eyes. He wanted to burst into the shrine, to demand answers, to scream about his father's cold, unsympathetic cruelty.

But, he knew he couldn't face his father, not now, not like this. He needed time to process what he'd heard, to find a way forward. With a heavy heart, he slipped back into the shadows, letting the gathering storm swallow him whole as he turned and ran.

He ran until his lungs burned, until the shrine and his father's words were far behind him. But they followed, echoing in his mind: *a living reminder of my own failings... the gods are punishing me through him...*

He still needed help, someone to help him with his quandary. Ifagbemi might hold the highest seat among the Awo of this kingdom, but he was not the only elder with wisdom.

Agboniregun, the old Iyanifa who had been close to his mother, respected for her clarity and compassion—someone who might help him parse the riddle and his own tangled fears without judgment.

## **Succor of Woe**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

He stayed in the shadows until he reached Agboniregun's area in the King's marketplace, taking shelter behind the palace courtyard. The market churned with nervous energy as people hurried to complete their business before the storm. From his hiding place, he watched Agboniregun's stall in the herbalists' corner, where smoke from burning herbs created a hazy screen around her.

A fresh gust of wind rattled the trees overhead, scattering debris across the courtyard. Ifakolapo closed his eyes, wrestling with the pain that welled in his chest. 'I tried, Morenike. I truly did. But he... I can't do this.' His heart felt heavier with each throb of thunder.

When he finally stepped into the market, whispers followed him through the crowd.

"—the Oluawo is asking after him—"

"—such disrespect to miss his own—"

"—what will Ifagbemi say—"

The whispers fell away as he passed. The implications were clear enough: the son of Ifagbemi, missing his final initiation while his father waited to perform the sacred rites. The gossip would feed on this for weeks.

Ifakolapo skirted the edge of the marketplace, following the acrid scent of burning herbs. Smoke formed a hazy screen around Agboniregun's stall - his destination.

The old woman looked up as he approached, her clouded eyes somehow still penetrating. "I was wondering when you would come," she said, setting aside the herbs she was grinding. "The birds have been restless today."

"I need your wisdom," Ifakolapo said, crouching beside her. As he recited Ifatoyin's riddle, her hands slowed, then stilled.

For a long moment, there was only the sound of distant haggling and the soft crackle of burning herbs. Then, she began to speak: "Your mother used to help me crush these leaves. We shared many secrets, even after I stopped being an Iyanifa."

Something cold settled in Ifakolapo's stomach. "Iya wa, e ma pe fun wa o... but, why are you telling me this?"

She resumed grinding her herbs, but her movements were mechanical now, distracted. "O ti e je k'in bale na? Your impatience is palpable today... understandably so."

She stopped grinding. "Before you were born, your mother came to me. She had dreamed of a tree whose roots grew up instead of down, and whose fruit turned to stone in the eating." The old woman's voice dropped lower. "Three days later, she was gone."

"What did it mean?" Ifakolapo leaned forward eagerly.

"I don't think she ever learned its true meaning." she tilted her head, "But your riddle..." she stopped, her eyes finding a truth deep beneath Ifakolapo's "You think you've already solved it, don't you?"

Ifakolapo's silence spoke volumes.

"Ah." Her fingers traced patterns in the scattered herbs. "You and your father... each nursing your own poison, each waiting for the other to offer the antidote first." She lifted a bitter leaf, and crushed it between her fingers. "Strange how the sweetest herbs can turn toxic when tended with the wrong heart."

Her eyes fixed on him, she continued, "But, there's something else though, isn't there? Something that sits like poison in your mouth, unspoken?"

The memory of Beleku's trial rose unbidden in Ifakolapo's mind. His hands clenched in his lap.

"You know," she continued, her voice taking on an edge, "People talk about him all the time—Ifatoyin, how great he truly was. Your father was his apprentice, yet

when people speak of him, he is never in the shadow of his master. The Great Ifagbemi, not just a diviner, but a great Onisegun. No enemy ever attacked when he was present in town—not even the Igbo—*for fear of his charms.*"

Her hand found his wrist with surprising strength. "I have the same advise for you as I did for your mother all those years ago. And in your case, it is even more pertinent. If there's anyone who would understand this riddle. It would be your father... understand its meaning better than an old woman who grinds herbs in the market

"The truth may be bitter medicine, but bitter medicine only serves to heal. Lies are similar, but they do not heal, they only poison."

Her hand found his wrist with surprising strength. "I have the same advice for you as I did for your mother all those years ago. And in your case, it is even more pertinent. If there's anyone who would understand this riddle, it would be your father... understand its meaning better than an old woman who grinds herbs in the market."

She leaned closer, her voice barely above a whisper. "The truth may be bitter medicine, but bitter medicine only serves to heal. Lies are similar, but they do not heal, they only poison."

Her words struck him hard, he knew she was right. But as he walked away from her stall, doubt crept in like evening shadows. If Ifatoyin truly wanted him to confront his father, why prevent him from attending the initiation? Unless... unless he had misunderstood everything from the start.

## **Liquid Respite**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Agboniregun's words followed him through the market:  
*The truth may be bitter medicine, but lies are slower poison.*

On his way out of the market, he found Morenike by the marketplace's edge, overseeing porters as they balanced her mother's trade goods in baskets and gourds atop their heads. Even amid the bustle of workers and the growing storm, she noticed him immediately. She always did.

"Be careful with those," she called to a porter struggling with a large calabash of palm oil, then turned to face him fully.

"The skies speak of your mood today," she said, studying his face. "I heard you missed the initiation."

There was no judgment in her voice, only concern — the same steady presence that had anchored him through so many storms before. But today, even that familiar comfort twisted in his gut.

"Morenike," his voice cracked on her name. "I need your help."

She took in his appearance—ceremonial robes now dust-stained, face drawn with fear and exhaustion. Her eyes flickered to the porters waiting with their loads, then back to him. He knew she had to ensure these goods reached Iyalode's trading partners. Yet another weight to add to his conscience.

"What's happened to you?"

He pulled her to the side, voice low and hurried, as he recounted Ifatoyin's ominous visit, the paralyzing spell, the vision of his mother, the riddle, and finally, his visit with Agboniregun.

"You've been through more than anyone should in a day," Morenike said softly.  
"Even the birds are uneasy."

She nodded to a cluster of crows watching them with unsettling stillness. Ifakolapo looked up to see the same bird staring back, its black eyes reflecting more than he wanted to see.

"I feel them watching. I feel **everything** right now," Ifakolapo breathed out a trembling sigh.

"Agboniregun's words only deepened my confusion. She told me to seek my father, but he..."

Ifakolapo stopped, this conversation had happened before. His jaw tightened. He remembered the bitterness in his father's voice—*the boy has always been a disappointment*—and the words seared his mind all over again.

Morenike's brow etched with concern.

"So you agree with Agboniregun? That I must face him, just... talk?"

"Eventually, yes. But not before you've looked inward." Morenike stepped closer, lowering her voice.

Ifakolapo felt something digging into him. Part of him yearned to accept her wisdom, to let her soothe his anguished spirit. But the storm inside him raged on, drowning out reason's quiet whisper.

Morenike's voice dropped to a murmur.

"Reflect on the kind of man—and leader—you want to be, Ifakolapo. Confronting him now, in your pain and fury, might only make things worse." She held his hand gently. "Besides, have you considered that the riddle may be referring to you? What if **you** are the tree being asked to bend?"

He felt his chest tighten at the suggestion. A day ago, he would have scoffed at such an idea—*him, the tree*? But as thunder rumbled overhead, he found he couldn't so easily dismiss it. If anything, a new fear took root in his chest: *what if she was right?*

He opened his mouth to protest, but a crack of thunder stole his words. Lightning illuminated Morenike's face—patient, kind, and so sure in her assessment.

Ifakolapo shook his head roughly, as if he could dislodge her unsettling insight.  
"I can't just sit with this. I have to *do* something."

He turned on his heel before she could respond, plunging back into the churning crowd, fists clenched at his sides. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe around the tightness in his chest.

*Palm wine.* Yes, that would dull the doubts ringing in his head, would grant him a few blessed moments of numbness before he had to face his destiny.

Ignoring Morenike's call of his name, he shouldered through the press of bodies, letting the rising wind swallow her voice. He knew, in some distant corner of his mind, that he was running from more than her gentle admonishment.

But in that moment, with the storm howling its fury and time slipping through his fingers like sand, he couldn't bring himself to care. He needed respite, and he would find it at the bottom of a gourd—the rest could wait.

Morenike watched him go, her hand half-raised as if to call him back. The sorrow in her eyes mingled with a deeper concern, an unspoken understanding of the battle raging within him.

She whispered a prayer to Oshun, entreating the goddess of love and healing to guide Ifakolapo through this crucible of the soul. Then, with a heavy sigh, she turned back to her duties, the weight of her own worries and fears pressing upon her heart.

The palmwine seller's stall loomed ahead, promising oblivion. Ifakolapo stumbled toward it, like a man possessed.

A few cowries exchanged hands, and then the gourd was in his grasp, sloshing with false promises. The first swallow burned like liquid fire, but he welcomed the pain, hoping it would cauterize the wounds within.

"*Just a little bit,*" he told himself, gulping down the palm wine. But even as the world blurred at the edges, Morenike's words echoed in his mind:  
*Reflect on the kind of man—and leader—you want to be.*

He squeezed his eyes shut against the hot sting of tears. What kind of man was he, drowning his fears in drink?

The palm wine burned going down, but it couldn't burn away the image of his mother crying behind that mystic veil., couldn't drown out Ifatoyin's words: *If you are not a just man... Another gulp, and his father's words came back: ...a disappointment, a living reminder of my own failings...*

*'Physical pain, that I can take,' another swallow, 'But this... there is nowhere to soothe... no egbò (wound) to tend to... The only tonic is palmwine.'*

## **Liquid Insight**

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

The darkness of the sky deepened, and thunder crackled like a divine gavel. Through bleary eyes, Ifakolapo pushed past the edge of the marketplace, clutching his gourd. Each swallow burned less than the last as he wandered aimlessly, the storm's threats muffled by the wine's embrace.

He slumped against a wall, sliding down to sit in the dust.  
*Just a moment's rest, he thought. Just a moment to forget...*

His eyes drifted closed.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, water moved like something alive. From its depths emerged a figure—a woman clothed in white, but the cloth writhed as if woven from living things. Cowries clicked at her throat, each shell turning to reveal a tiny dark eye.

She held a clay pot in one hand, and it *leaked water upward*, defying nature itself. In the other, a knife caught moonlight that shouldn't exist in this darkness. Her face shifted—sometimes young and beautiful, sometimes ancient and terrible—but her eyes remained constant: deep pools reflecting scenes from the trial, moments of falsehood given voice, truth buried alive...

Ifakolapo wanted to scream, to beg forgiveness, but his voice seemed trapped in his throat. That was when he felt a pinprick at his wrist. He glanced down:

A scorpion crawled across his hand, its stinger rising like a poised question.

Ifakolapo's eyes snapped open with a strangled gasp. Bile seared his throat as he lurched forward, the acrid taste flooding his mouth. He gasped for air, his lungs burning with the effort, as the last wisps of the vision dissipated like smoke on the wind. Then, he noticed... raindrops on his face, each drop a stinging reminder of how much time he had left.

He lurched forward and retched violently. The palm wine that spilled onto the earth was darker than it should have been, writhing before seeping away as though it had a life of its own. Each retch brought a fresh wave of agony, until his throat stung with the taste of copper.

The riddle rang through his wine-soaked mind:

*“The tree that bears false fruit poisons its own roots.”*

Morenike’s voice rang alongside it—the tree, was his own.

He pressed a trembling palm to his chest, recalling the old lies he’d told in the name of the Orisha, the words that had condemned a man to die. No matter how he tried to drown the past, it rose again, choking him.

*‘Is this the punishment for my transgression?’*

*‘Perhaps Ifatoyin had intervened to keep me from a fraudulent initiation. An initiation on a foundation of lies would taint every divination I ever do.’*

Shaking, he forced himself upright. A distant, desperate thought slipped into his mind: *Ayelala, the Enforcer of Truth*. Poison... it was all coming together now.

A tear rolled down his cheek, *‘I need to atone,’* he wiped the tear with his left hand and smashed the gourd with the right.

The storm lashed at his robes as he staggered through the deserted paths on the outskirts of town. Thunder snarled overhead, a wrathful reminder of how little time he had left. Still, he pressed on, ignoring the mud that clung to his ankles and the wind that snatched at his breath.

The shrine stood half-hidden by ancient trees and woven vines. Lantern light flickered against the carved wooden posts, revealing the worn faces of spirits etched there. He gathered what was needed: white cloth, kola nuts, palm oil, honey.

One by one, he laid them out carefully, though his hands shook so badly it was a wonder he didn’t spill them all. The red palm oil trickled onto the earth, and the ground seemed to swallow it eagerly, as if thirsting for his confession. His voice

wavered as he murmured the ancient prayers, each syllable heavy with dread and longing.

The weight of the false testimony on his tongue, the haunted look on Beleku's face. Each image seared him anew, branding his conscience with an indelible mark of guilt.

"I was a coward," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the storm's howl. "I betrayed the truth to please my father, to win his approval. But it was a hollow victory, a poisoned gourd that I have been drinking from ever since."

The palm oil glistened in the light of the fire, a silent witness to his confession. Ifakolapo closed his eyes, feeling the weight of his past pressing down upon him.

"I do not ask for forgiveness," he murmured, his words a fervent prayer. "I ask only for the strength to face the consequences of my actions, to bear the weight of my own false fruit. Ayelala, guide me in the ways of truth, that I may find the courage to do what must be done."

The storm's roar greeted his final offering, as though Ayelala herself refused to be satisfied. The weight in his chest felt heavier than before, and he knew—this was not the end. It might well only be the beginning.

## ***Gods of Justice – The Confrontation and the Judgment***

### **[NEW CHAPTER]**

Knowing it was not over, there was only one way forward now—His father—whether it was to seek help or lay bare his feelings

Lightning split the sky as Ifakolapo staggered toward his father's shrine, rain stinging his face and soaking his once-pristine ceremonial robes. Every step churned mud beneath his feet, but he pressed on. If he was going to die, he would speak his truth first.

He found Ifagbemi standing at the shrine's entrance, half-lit by dancing lightning. The older man's eyes narrowed with disapproval.

"So," Ifagbemi said, voice hard as flint, "you finally show yourself after disgracing me—"

"Disgracing you?" Ifakolapo's laughter was wild and bitter, swallowed by the howl of the wind. "You speak of disgrace? You, who couldn't even be a father to your own son? I heard you calling me a disappointment—a curse—behind my back. Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Thunder rolled, a sullen drumbeat echoing his accusation. He took a shaky step closer, jabbing a finger at Ifagbemi's chest. "Tell me—didn't I try to please you? Didn't I study Ifa day and night, even though my heart was never in it? You forced me to train under Awoleri of all people—Awoleri! That man can barely recite three odus without stumbling! You think that was the path I wanted?"

Ifagbemi scowled. "Watch your tongue, boy."

"Or what?" Ifakolapo grabbed his father's buba, pulling him close. "Ara ma pa awa mejeji ni!" The words rang out—a declaration that thunder would strike them both. "I heard you say you wished I'd never been born. That the gods cursed you twice with me. Was that a lie, or do you truly despise me so much you can't even meet my eyes?"

Ifagbemi felt heat rise through his ears, his heart pumped with rage, '*L'enu e*' (*How dare you? from your lips?*) the thought to himself. Ifakolapo braced himself for the blow he'd felt coming for years.

The slap came fast and hard, splitting Ifakolapo's lip and sending him staggering. "Disappointment," Ifagbemi spat. Then, with deliberate movements, he began removing his charms and sacred implements as lightning fractured the sky behind him.

"You want to know about disappointment?" Ifagbemi's voice rose as he stripped away his charms, amulets and vestments. "Let me tell you about the day your mother told me she was with child. How my heart soared. How I dreamed of a son who would carry our legacy." His hands moved faster, more violently. "Then you were born, and the first thing you did was kill her."

With a final violent motion, he stood in nothing but his sokoto, rain plastering his clothes to his skin. "You took everything from me that day. You reminded me too much of her—the day you came into this world and took her life. Every time I looked at you, I saw what I lost!"

He grabbed Ifakolapo, their faces inches apart. "And then you grew up weak. I gave you every opportunity to learn strength, to become a man worthy of her sacrifice. But you?" A savage headbutt sent Ifakolapo sprawling in the mud. "You never learned."

"Worthy?" Ifakolapo spat blood, pushing himself up. "You would talk of worth? You're nothing but a coward hiding behind your duties. You never showed me what a true man looks like!"

Ifagbemi's response was brutal—fists and feet finding their mark as lightning turned the world white. "A coward?" Each word punctuated by a blow. "I am the reason this town still stands! I am the reason you weren't sent to die in battle like the weakling you are!"

The beating continued until Ifakolapo lay gasping in the mud.

"The moment I leave for a pilgrimage, you bring shame on the town, and it almost gets razed down by battle. Raiders pass by this town and have never attacked. Not in my presence. No wonder you never made your initiation. You were never worthy of the title to begin with." Ifagbemi stood over him, chest heaving. "The storm begins. I leave you to your judgment." His voice dropped to a venomous whisper. "You have brought shame on yourself, on my name, on our ancestors, and most of all, on your mother."

He spat on the ground beside his son. "When you reach the land of the dead, tell her I tried my best with you. Omo t'a folorunsho gaan gbodo sho ara e." The proverb cut deep—even a child placed in God's care must care for himself.

"Those killed by Sango receive no funeral," Ifagbemi continued. "You'll die worse than a dog." With a final look of disgust, he turned away.

As he walked away, a flicker in the rain caught his eye. He blinked, certain it was only lightning—and yet, a shape formed... a face. Her face—Omolanke. Her ghostly silhouette shimmered, tears etched into her features as she watched them.

Ifagbemi froze. He blinked, certain the shape was a trick of the storm. But the vision persisted. "No... Omolanke? Iyawo mi (my WiFi)" His voice broke, raw anguish ripping through him.

Was she truly here, or had his rage finally driven him mad? The apparition shook its head slowly, turning away in sorrow.

"N—no... come back!" Ifagbemi staggered forward. The storm thundered in his ears, but Omolanke dissolved into streaks of rain. Then he turned to see Ifakolapo lying sprawled in the mud, unmoving.

He almost wished the boy would rise and curse him, just so he wouldn't lie there so still.

*'Dear gods... what have I done?'*

He dropped to his knees, he knew his son was right in more ways than one, but even if he wasn't, was this the way to treat one's own blood?

He fell with his face in the mud, crawling through the mire to his son's side. "I'm so sorry... I... I failed you."

"Sango—spare my son, Oya, Ayelala, please!"

"I beg you, take me instead!" The cry tore from him, a plea of shame and self-loathing. "Saanu mi, ohun nikan ni mo ni mo... He's all I have left!"

The thundering began to intensify, and Ifagbemi turned to his rage again, "Why won't you relent! Is this the lesson you wanted me to learn? To see the monster I've become?"

But as he finished speaking, a flash of lightning seared the sky, a deafening thunder rattled the shrine, leaving Ifagbemi temporarily blind and his ears ringing.

At first, he thought he had been struck, but as the aftershock of the flash cleared from his eyes, he saw smoke rise around Ifakolapo's still form. By the corner of the back entrance to the shrine, Ifagbemi saw Morenike. She let out a loud cry that pierced the rain, and they both rushed over, expecting to see a charred body.

Yet as the smoke cleared, they found Ifakolapo breathing, barely conscious but alive, his lips trembling with whispered words: "Mo ṭoṛo àforíjì... mo ṭoṛo àforíjì."

Ifagbemi let out a ragged sob, yanking off his muddy buba to shield his son from the hammering rain. Gently, he lifted the battered young man into his arms, cradling him like the child he'd never truly allowed himself to love. Morenike knelt beside them, eyes shining with tears and relief, pressing a hand to Ifakolapo's forehead.

Together, they retreated into the shrine's alcove. Overhead, the thunder began to fade, its once-roaring drums retreating into distant rumbles—like departing footsteps of the gods. Rain still fell in heavy sheets, but with less fury, as though the orisha themselves had withdrawn their wrath.

Ifagbemi held Ifakolapo close, tears mixing with rain on his cheeks. "Forgive me," he whispered, brushing damp curls from his son's brow. "Forgive me, my son. I have

been blind for so long, letting my pain turn to poison. No more. You deserve better from me."