

THE NAKED LAND
BEN E. ODJENABOR

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richfellabooks@yahoo.com
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My sincere appreciation goes to everybody who played a role in making this book come to life. It just didn't matter how big or how small that role was, the fact is it mattered so much to me.

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Thanks.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the struggle, sufferings, disappointments, hopes and future of our beloved motherland.

“Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!”

William Shakespeare

Macbeth

PART ONE

DAWN OF GLAD TIDINGS

CHAPTER ONE

It's been more than twenty market days since people from Lagos, the white men who had come from far across the seas, had been searching the entire land for what they called oil. How could man search for oil in the bottom of the earth. Oil comes from the nuts carrying plants in the fields. But all the same these men had in the past worked wonders that baffled the entire people. They had put so much power in ordinary iron, that at the pull of your finger you could kill a lion; a lion before which every man on earth trembled at its sight, excepting the Ogbus of our land of course who could stand before it armed with just a cutlass or nothing at all in the cold, dark and fearful forest, and still carry the head of the Lion back into the village. The white men who could sail across the endless and great waters from the top to the bottom of the world! Certainly they must be very sure of what they were looking for. Yet, many villagers who had seen them carrying their big machines and trying as hard as possible to push them down to the heart of the land had laughed at them. Some of the new Christians said they were only looking for trouble by trying to get to hell, a place believed to be deep under the ground where the devil is believed to live. That idea alone really frightened the people of the land, as it has given birth to the a superstitious belief, which was giving the villagers real heartache – that the devil would reply with fire from hell gushing out from all the deep pits the white men were digging in their land. And that it would rapidly consume the land. To safe-guard the people, the village chief had already offered seven heads of Lion to the gods, to appease them, and protect the people from possible dangers which the white men's activities in the land may cause.

At the very beginning the people had objected to the move but the government officials had pleaded and explained to the King and the elders of the land that the activities of the white men would bring no trouble but favour to the land. That once oil was discovered the land would become like that of England and that was how they got allowed.

The Oboh sat there on bare earth, his face fearfully grimed with white native chalk, his eyes surrounded by crimson coloured patches of clay. He was a very thin man. Around his thin neck sat strings of charms, tied in red cloth stuck with cowries of diverse shapes and sizes. His legs were spread apart and in between them sat an ewwere, a locally made clay saucer containing cowries. Beside it sat a bottle of freshly brewed ogogoro and four pieces of kola nuts. A small council of elders sat right in front of him. They were quiet and very expectant. Yet almost too impatient to wait and watch the old spiritualist perform the small rite that usually precede the divination process.

Over the years the people had asked the gods of their land through this medium to determine the truth of intricate matters; a prosperous year, or unravel a confusing mystery. And the results had been straight to the point. All of such had been the duty of the Chief priest of the land, but pertaining to the white men's intention of searching the land for oil, Ominikoro, the great seer, had spoken not so well. The people said he had spoken from the two sides of his mouth. Someone had probably bribed him or how then must he predict the rain falling while the sun is still up in the sky? Nobody understood why he couldn't be specific about what the gods had revealed to him. Who was he afraid of, certainly no one exactly, but his words gave every room for doubt.

The elders were not satisfied with his prediction and decided to call in another seer to inquire of the gods secretly.

The Oboh grabbed the cowries in his hands, shaking them heavily and chanting incantations. His eyes were turned toward heaven; his ears tuned unto the gods, waiting to be fed with the required information.

He threw the cowries onto the ewwere and jerked his head forward, staring sagely at the form the cowries had taken. The mystery they had unveiled. But it took another round of his routine casting of cowries before he decided to speak. He cleared his throat with a cough and said;

“What is sweet to the tongue may be peppery to the anus. When the wind blows, then you see the chicken's rump. Good things are what we pray for,” As he shunned out these ominous words, he grinned dangerously at his audience.

“Wise one, what is it the gods actually said?” Ovie Oviri the head of the council of elders asked, not satisfied with what the seer said.

“The coin has two faces.”

“What and how do you mean?” Another elder asked.

The Oboh grabbed the cowries in his hands again, murmuring more incantations. A smile hung on his face but it did not look too real. It was usual of seers to keep up the hopes of their pessimistic clients with a smile. But they had seen enough to be so easily fooled, and encountered enough to know his smile did not come from what lay deep down in his heart.

He cast the cowries onto the porcelain again and made a throaty sound. He studied the pattern of the cowries again and listened to the distant voices of the gods. The voices were low but clear and unmistakably distinct.

“The dark clouds have gone. Now you can see the heaven's eyes. They shone so bright, you might get dazzled.”

“What did the gods say?” Ovie Oviri asked again, impatient eyes staring at the seer.

“Behold, I see fishes all over the river - ” he said smiling. A chief jumped up excitedly. “I told you! Fortunes await us! There's no difference between this land and Oloibiri where it has been found by the same white men.”

The spiritualists started singing and laughing at the same time. Then suddenly he started shaking his head. But the smile was still there, puzzling his audience.

“The fishes are upside down,” he finally explained.

“What do you mean?” Ovie Oviri reacted with a frown.

“They are dead. Floating on top of the rivers. Their bellies have swallowed poisons from the bottom of the earth. And those who eat them will suffer the same fate.”

“You are saying the white men’s activities will bring a curse upon this land? Isn’t that what you are saying?” Ovie Oviri asked, bittered by the seer’s words.

The native doctor ignored the question and continued with his statements. “From the heart of the great waters beneath this land wealth and death shall flow out.”

“God forbids death!” An elder declared.

“Let that be to our enemies!” Ovie Oviri added. “Why does it have to be mixed fortunes?”

“Yes, let that be our enemies’ portion” Another elder added.

“The eggs that the hen lays are taken away from her, the troubles will be sown by the whitemen and harvested by blackmen,” the seer said, poured himself a shot of gin, gulped it down and continued, “the sweet milk of the mother goats’ breast, instead of feeding her kids, is feeding the lions’ cubs.”

The elders were now confused. What they needed was a straight, honest answer to their questions. And now this old man had said these words. ‘The coin has two faces’ he had said. What faces? Things should just be black or white?

They decided to have small private talk together. It took about five minutes before they turned back to face the seer. By now they had decided to ask him to stop speaking in parables and relate to them as friends.

“Ehh, please, we understand everything you’ve just said, but we are now asking of your opinion about these questions we’ve come to ask.”

“My opinion does not count. The gods have spoken. And that is my opinion. Take it or leave it.”

“The whitemen’s search for oil underneath our land, are they going to find it?”

“From the heart of the great waters beneath this land wealth will flow. They shall find oil – in surplus than you can ever imagine.”

“Is that true?” An elder asked excitedly. His eyes glowed with joy, brows were raised as far as they could go.

“And lastly, before I forget.” The seer said, and cleared his throat with a cough. “I saw big wads of money stained with a colour. And the green leaves of our plantain tree were turning brown.”

“What is the colour wise one?”

“Red,” he said flatly.

“God forbid! That colour means blood? Red means danger!”

“Don’t be stupid Akpo, red is the colour of oil. Isn’t palm oil red? Why have you been so pessimistic?”

The rest of the elders burst into a wild laughter. The revelation of a prosperous future had overwhelmed them with joy. Seers have their own ways of terrifying their clients with fearful words before saying the other side of the story. The government people had promised huge sums would be given to the community to take care of their problems. They even said there would be a great change here that the land would become like that of England.

“Ehn, thank you very much, the great seer. May the gods continue to open your eyes.” Ovie Oviri said.

“You must remember, fight, you must fight hard, and be wise. The sweet milk from the mother goat’s breast that should feed her kids is ending up in cubs’ belly.”

“Yes, we will remember that. And tell it to the ruler of the land.”

The great seer gathered his paraphernalia together and spun himself with a great force. And he was gone. He had disappeared into thin air. The elders were amazed by the great feat but that wasn't the first time they had seen him do that. He was a man that preferred taking shortcuts to wherever he was going. His house was about five miles away, but he would get there even before they dust their feet to leave.

The prophecies of the seer took just a year and six months to come to past. Indeed there was rivers of oil of vast size flowing beneath the land. The whitemen from the capital had confirmed that. And to the surprise of the people not a single blast of fire from hell had come rushing up from the great dept. What was there was wealth, one that the gods had preserved for the people of the land for hundreds of years, from generations to generations.

The town crier had awoken the people that blessed morning with the tidings –
“Wake up, wake up, you blessed people of our great land. The king of the land sent me to tell you this. Rivers of wealth are beneath your feet”

Amongst the Oviri household, it was Michael that first heard the good news. He had eavesdropped on the matter about four or five months ago when the elders came to discuss the issue at his father's compound. Then the elders were getting worried about the damage the oil-hunters as they were nicknamed, were causing on the farmlands and fishing sites. It had taken close to 'too long' for the search to be over. And doubts had already started filtering into the people's mind. He rose with a start, rubbing his eyes clear with the back of his hand. And went straight to his father's bedroom. The old man was still asleep, snoring his nights away. He tapped him thrice. And that was enough to wake his light headed father up.

“What is it? Isn't it too late?”

“No Papa, its morning already.” He said with elation. “And the town crier is out there.”

“What is he saying again? Can't someone just have a good night rest?”

“No Papa,” he said and started smiling, obviously made very happy by the tiding.

“What is it? Who is dead this time?”

Michael decided to use quotes from the Town Crier to announce the tidings –

“rivers of wealth are beneath our feet!”

“Eh! Is that what he said?” He jumped out of the bed and ran out to hear first hand.

His wrapper almost fell off his waist but for the quick intervention of his hand. His mind was already fixed outside, he could even see the town crier from inside the house. Yes, he could see the grin on his broad youthful face. He could hear the melodious clank from the agogo he was carrying. Yes, indeed the dawn of glad tidings had arrived.

CHAPTER TWO

James Pobo led the small army of thugs. They were heavily armed with machetes, charms and locally made guns the village blacksmith had prepared for him. He was a heavily built man, about six feet tall. He had remained the best wrestler in the land for more than a decade. People were afraid of him and always let him have his way since no one could easily gear himself up and stand up against him. Anybody who crossed his way should be ready for a fight, gladiator – style, at the village square.

They marched straight into the farmland where the white men had discovered oil and he began pointing and giving instructions to his little army. He spoke with authority and zeal.

“Look at this farmland properly,” he said, hesitating for emphasis. “This land belong

to our immediate family. I don't know who gave some idiots the idea that we co-own this piece of land with them."

"That's funny? How could they dream such a bad dream?" The rest of the thugs burst into laughter.

James Pobo continued, "From today onwards, let it not be heard that the Oviri, Udoje, Akpen family or any other co-own this land with us. If someone whispers that anywhere, break his teeth, or tear his head apart. They...."

"What are you people doing here?" Ovie Oviri challenged. He had rushed out of the forest from nowhere.

"What are you doing here too? I should be asking you!"

"What did I hear you say, James: Are you out of your senses? Disrespecting your elder?" A man from the Akpen family challenged him. He had accompanied Oviri to the farmland earlier. He was still trembling with disbelief. He wasn't sure his five senses were working well. His eyes had seen these people but they may as well be imaginary things. His ears had heard what James Pobo had said, yes, he had heard it all, but there was just no way he would believe such words really ever got spoken by one of his distant half-brothers. His heart thumped heavily against his chest and his entire body quivered. His

blood was oozing out adrenalin into every tissue. And the machete he was holding trembled.

"James! I said what did I hear you say!"

Ovie Oviri sensed the contest was going to take another level. He had to do something as quick as possible to quench the fire before it got started. He stepped forward, preventing Irhikefe from going forward. "It is enough!"

By now James had already started chanting a war song, brandishing his machete in the air. The sharpened edge caught rays of sunlight and sparkled dangerously.

"James, are you out of your mind? You have taken too much Ogogoro already this morning?" Ovie Oviri, the head of the council of elders cautioned.

James continued chanting the war song, he had even been joined in singing by his small army.

"I am ordering you to leave this land now!" Ovie ordered

"God forbid!" James cried out. "Nobody can order us out of our property. This is our farmland. This is where they buried my great grand fathers. This is our land!"

"You are playing with fire oh." Kefe warned, pointing his machete at James, shaking vehemently. "You are playing with fire!"

Suddenly James jumped up and pounced on Kefe like an angry lion. A bloody contest ensued. The sharp sound of clashing machetes tore through the air. Then suddenly with one swift, dexterous swing of his right hand, James drove his machete down Kefe's head. A big gash, oozing with that crimson liquid that sustained life appeared on his head. Kefe fell to the ground with a heavy thud. His body spasmed, quivering with shock as it prepared to let go of the last hold to life. A life that could have made a difference to his people.

"Ahh! Osonobrugwe! Oh my God!" Ovie Oviri cried out loud "You have killed him James. You have killed him!" He started backing away for fear that they would also decide to attack him.

"I warned the both of you! You didn't listen! Die now!"

At once Ovie Oviri raised his hands up and started chanting incantations. "The bat does not see at day time! The blind cannot find a grain of garri amidst sand! It is impossible

to see where the bush fowl hides its head in the forest. I am gone!" With that he ran into

the thick bush.

“You cannot run! Hold him!” James ordered his boys.

They rushed after him, surrounded the perimeter and began searching for him.

Their eyes were wide open and keen, armed hands were held poised, ready to descend on their helpless prey.

“Bring him out!” James cried out. “Kill him!”

“We can’t find him!” The thugs chorused. Their prey had gone with the wind.

“What? You can’t find who? He’s under those shrubs!”

“Can’t you see we’ve searched the whole place? We can’t find him. He has charm, disappearing powers!”

James became numb. A cold sensation ran down his spine and his entire body shook with terror. The blast of adrenalin had surprisingly ebbed. Leaving him cold. He could not believe how cold he felt even under the charring heat of the afternoon sun. He could not believe what he had done. He stared at his blood-stained hand dumbly. Then his eyes went to the lifeless body. Kefe’s eyes seemed to stare back at him. At once he realized he had been used by the devil to take away a simple man’s life.

“What do we do?” He asked, struggling hard to hide away the tears in his eyes from the boys. That would be a sign of cowardice, he thought. He summoned courage and pulled himself together. “I’m going to figure out what to do next. And don’t you panic. Don’t panic, I can take care of everything.”

“This is a big trouble. I don’t think we can.....”

“Shut up! You idiot! You should’ve killed Oviri at once, the moment you saw Kefe fall down. Are you not an Ogbu?”

A brief silence settled around them.

“Hurry up and lets go, and plan what next at the Shrine by the Akpobisi tree.”

Ovie Oviri appeared in his bedroom. There was nobody inside and he walked straight through the door to the living room. He went up and down the room aimlessly. He

just didn’t know what to do. The shock of the incident at the forest had overwhelmed him. He stood still pondering. ‘Oh, Kefe is gone,’ he lamented in his mind.

“Papa, when did you get in?” Michael asked, curious about his father’s re-appearance. He was sitting by the door plucking palm nuts off the bunch, when he suddenly heard a sound inside this father’s room.

Ovie ignored the question. He fell into a nearby chair and started sobbing. Tears rolled freely this time.

“What is the matter Papa?”

“Ehh!!” he exclaimed. “Ominikorho said it! We just didn’t want to understand.”

Michael could not take it any longer. “Papa I will scream oh.”

With that his father sprang back to full control of himself. He jerked himself up and – “Please don’t. I’m okay.”

“But what happened? Where is uncle Kefe?”

“Ehh!” He started sobbing again.

“Let me go and call Nene. She should be able to...”

“No, no.” He declined and grabbed his son’s hand, preventing him from turning to go. “Let me go to invite others first. Something terrible has happened.”

“Where is uncle Kefe?” Michael repeated his question. He was still curious and afraid something bad had happened. Maybe a lion or tiger had attacked him in the forest.

“I left him in the forest.”

“Is he Okay?”

“Yes! Enough of your questions anyway. I’m rushing down to see the king.

Michael wanted to go behind him. He knew all wasn’t well, especially with uncle

Kefe. His best bet was a tiger or wild cow or equally a wild pig must have attacked him. Several cases like that had been reported. He had even experienced it when he accompanied his father that fateful night to hunt. The bush cow had appeared from nowhere, and that was it, right behind him. It raged ahead in one swift frenzied attack that could have taken his life away. He swiftly turned around and saw it coming, helpless. Even the axe he was holding turned gelatinous.

Then came a thunderous sound from his father's shot gun. It was so loud that he fell to the ground. He woke up several hours after the bush cow had been butchered and roasted, in the village. The incidents in-between had come and gone while he was unconscious. When awoke he just couldn't imagine how his father had done the magic. How did he manage to carry the monstrous wild cow and him to the village single – handed? If he did that all alone, then he must have had a giant for a father without knowing it all these while. And if he was able to get assistance from someone or somewhere, it must be that he could run faster than a tiger.

CHAPTER THREE

“You can't believe what has happened,” he spoke trembling. Several heads turned and eyes fixated at him.

“What happened? Please get yourself together and tell us,” the oldest man among the small crowd that had built up around him outside while he was cursing, swearing and crying out urged him.

He tried to stop panting. It was unsuccessful. His heart still raged like a galloping buffalo. His eyes found the many prying ones, which were trying to probe the depth of his heart.

“Die? What is it?” They urged him. One man even reached his hand forward, grabbed and shook him vigorously.

“It is James!”

“What about him?”

Ovie shook his head sorrowfully. For some strange reason he was finding speaking very difficult. Relaying a bad news like this to the happy villagers felt like unleashing a leprous beggar on the people. Whatever or however he felt about it, he quickly realized, was unimportant now. He had to break the sad news sooner or later. And the sooner they learned about it was all the better.

“James Pobo attacked us in the forest and killed Irhikefe!”

“What? Tufie!” A man cursed and spat on the reddish earth. “That cannot be! Killed my own Irhikefe?”

“What? What went wrong?” Another man queried bitterly.

“We found him with a bunch of thugs in the forest. He was saying something like – this land is ours, make sure nobody claims it from us. If anybody does, kill him.” He paused and took a deep breath. “We approached and challenged him, he became aggressive and attacked us, together with his boys.”

“Hey! Let's go and find them!”

They found him there sprawled across the muddy and untidy earth of the shrub-covered farmland that preceded the forest. He seemed to be dead, quite right. A thick pool of blood lay next to his injured – or was it fractured skull. The villagers stared in awe. It was unbelievable that such a ruthless and nefarious act could be done by someone close. How could he? How could he have raised his hand and struck his own blood with a machete over what does not belong to him?

“Look!” A youngman cried out. “ I think he is still alive!”

Several eyes focused on the dead man more attentively. There was no sign of movement. He was still, sprawled lifeless on the cold earth. Eyes rolled back, focusing on the man that have hopelessly raised the false alarm.

“I swear, I saw his eye move,” he said, gesticulating with his hands.

“Let’s see, we’ve not even checked if he is still breathing.” The eldest man said and moved forward, bent over and touched the dead man. A chilly feeling engulfed his entire frame and he shuddered. He wasn’t sure it was the temperature of the body that made him shudder. It didn’t certainly seem that cold. In fact it was still warm, and the blood around his head didn’t look like it should look like. There could certainly be a chance Irhikefe’s body was still holding on tightly to life. The opposite may also be true.

“Is he dead?” A man asked. He wasn’t sure he had said the right thing. He wanted and should’ve said – Is it true? It felt foolish asking that kind of a question over an apparently lifeless body sprawled across the dirty earth. For over several minutes he wasn’t too sure he could reckon.

The elder leaned forward letting go of the natural coldness the living reflexively feel for dead bodies and placed his hand against the body lying on the ground. He waited and prayed for that unmistakable rise and fall of the chest cavity. He waited and prayed for there to at least be one more beat. Though he didn’t know how useful that could even be, or really how useless one last heartbeat was.

He’s still alive!” He shouted.

The news jolted the sympathizers to a spontaneous action. Every one wanted to help. They quickly turned him over, and started fanning him with a leather adjudju. Another man leaned over him, trying hard to remember what he had seen a white

missionary did to a dying man, over five years ago. He placed his hand over Irhikefe’s chest and started applying pressure. Another man rushed in squeezing an herb between his palm vigorously. He reached forward and placed it against Irhikefe’s nostrils. A few seconds ran by and what seemed like a sneeze came out of his nose. He was certainly too weak to respond actively to the stimuli.

“That’s good.” A man said. “Let’s rush him home.”

James Pobo had learned that the enraged people of the village were now angrily in search of him. Rumours had even reached him that the local policemen had been informed and they were now in the village waiting to arrest and take him away. For three days he had remained in the forest, with nothing to eat or drink. He would have returned to the village and beg the aggrieved for forgiveness but the king had already passed his sentence – he was to be dealt with and banished from the land, together with the young men who accompanied him.

Three whole days without food to eat or water to drink! He lamented. He felt a deep remorse for his rash, thoughtless, and selfish deed. ‘What really got into my head’ ‘But the land is actually, and rightfully mine’ Another hushed voice countered; ‘the land belongs to the family. It is not yours, James!’ He turned around to see who was talking but there was no one around. Even his accomplices had all taken to different flight paths and for the whole three days he hadn’t set his sunken eyes on any one of them. Who then was talking to him? He wondered. For once fear grabbed his heart, he was sure the voice didn’t come from inside his mind. It came from elsewhere. Or was it the voice of the spirit of the man he had murdered in cold blood? He began to panic and restlessly turned around anticipating a strange figure from any direction.

When he was convinced he was alone in the swampy mosquito infested forest, he began to ponder what would become of him. Funny how life could be. Three days ago, he was a free man, a free-born of his motherland. Today he had become a fugitive wondering

fearfully in this cursed swampy forest. He had heard about the story of Cain and Abel,

which the Church people had told. Cain murdered Abel and God cursed him – a fugitive and a wanderer! That is what I have become! He thought. A gloomy feeling ran down his spine like an electric shock. What was he to do? He had a wife and two kids back there in the village. Yesterday he was a family man, today greed and selfishness had turned his daylight into night, a night as black as the back of a cooking pot.

He was growing weak with each passing hour and there was very little he could eat – few fruits from shrubs and trees he wasn't sure were edible. Maybe it was better for him to eat from them and die of their poisons. If it got to that, it would be even better. I am better off dead, than for an Ogbu to live in the forest afraid of his own shadows like a beast. A vagabond waiting to be set free by a hungry and angry predator. A fugitive and a wanderer!

He kept on wandering through the forest, drinking from the dirty water in the swamp, since he realized he was going to die of thirst if he chose to avoid it. All he had now was a machete and a string of charm around his neck to protect him from any imaginable enemy. He knew he had to escape to somewhere safe, somewhere far that the police wouldn't be able to find, identify and arrest him. He thought about several places but Benin turned out to be his final choice. But then how was he going to get there? He knew he was getting weaker, dying of hunger and gross heartbreak. He had failed his family and would forever live to regret it. He shut his eyes and whispered a prayer, shook his head dejectedly and said, "I hope my wife and kids would find time to forgive me." Then he began to cry.

Irhikefe lay helpless on the hard clay bed. A thin layer of feather-fitted mattress lay beneath him. As far as he could tell it didn't give the least bit of comfort. Every moveable part of his body hurt. His head, God, it hurt like hell! A maddening headache tormented him day and night. His consciousness of his surrounding was only partial. A moment he would appear to be conscious and the next he would be far away, drifting aimlessly in space.

Ovie Oviri sat himself down at the corner of the bed. He felt very sorry for leading the youngman into the forest that fateful day. If he hadn't led him there this calamity would not have befallen him. Above all he was thankful to God who had preserved the youngman's life. For four days now he hadn't taken any good food. All he was able to have was pepper soup. His jaws seemed to have been jammed, refusing to open, and by that reason he found it almost impossible to open his mouth to eat. He felt better off keeping his mouth shut.

Ovie inspected the youngman's fractured head. Certainly it was a miracle this man was still breathing. A deep cut like that would kill a beast, not to mention a mere man. He called out for a youngman to bring in breakfast. He could tell Irhikefe was getting better; the swollen head had gone down. The herbal therapy had worked so well. In fact, like magic.

The youngman carried a tray of a food inside. Breakfast was pepper soup, boiled unripe plantain and red palm oil. He was going to be forcefully fed if he was to make anything good of the meal. He had to be, so that his strength could return to him. The plantains would provide the lost energy. He tapped the injured man thrice on the lap, hoping to wake him up.

Ufuoma the young beautiful woman who had only been married to James for two years sat outside the house. The world around her had suddenly changed. People no longer admired her as the beautiful wife of the great wrestler and warrior. No, things have become sour now. Nobody greeted her along the way. Even when she tried greeting them first, they only replied with an annoying hiss. Her husband had suddenly brought deep shame to

his household. Yesterday, at the market, nobody bought any goods from her. She sat there hoping and praying somebody would at least buy a bucket of garri or a bunch of unripe plantains from her but nobody did. It was now clear she was being treated like an outcast, a leprous beggar walking through the streets of stone-hearted rich people. Tears began to flow down her cheek freely. What has come over this family? She asked herself between her wailings but no answer came.

A passerby stopped to look at her, shook her head and hissed aloud. "Murderous household!"

Ufuoma stopped crying instantly. She was completely shocked to hear the other woman speak ill of her. How could she be so heartless? She wiped the tears away with the back of her hand and looked her foe in the eyes. Grinning dangerously.

"You are such a heartless idiot!"

The other woman was enraged. She quickly removed her head tie and wrapped it tightly around her waist and geared herself to challenge Ufuoma. "Are you not ashamed? Uuuh! Orhue! Mad woman and her murderous household! Uuuh!"

At first Ufuoma reflexively wanted to pounce on this utterly embarrassing stranger but second thought rebuked her. The people would say she want to repeat what her husband had done.

"Uuuh! Husband and wife alike! Birds of a feather! Are you not ashamed? You still want to fight me? Do you think you can kill me like your husband tried to kill my fiancé?" She went on raining verbal missiles on the other woman who had now decided to remain quiet. The quietness enraged her further and she stooped, grabbed a handful of sand and tossed it at Ufuoma. "W-i-t-c-h! Come and fight me o! Come and kill me too! Eramufefe!" She yelled bitterly at her.

Ufuoma had taken more than she could. Enough is enough, she thought. She angrily jerked herself up but no sooner she did that than she saw people rushing down to the scene. If she attacked the troublesome woman now they would find her guilty. She burst into tears again, realizing nobody would even support her. In that split second she realized what she could have done earlier on, she swiftly turned around and went through the door, inside she sat numb, the world had suddenly turned painfully cold.

It would take a long time before the stain would fade away. Maybe the best thing to do is to leave the village and head back for her father's house over ten or was it eleven miles away. Yes, this night she would pack up her belongings and leave the stale village for good. Remaining here would only spell doom to her. She was now a leprous beggar that must be detested and avoided at all cost. She must go now and return only when the disgusting odour of the rotten eggs had died.

CHAPTER FOUR

The evening was warm and noisy. Michael Oviri and family sat outside the house. There was a warm smile upon every face. It was yet another remarkable day in the history of their lives as the head of the family was marrying the third wife.

About two hundred or more people were in attendance, which included friends and well wishers from far and near.

Traditional marriage was a very big celebration that everyone would love to attend. Anyone who lived around, that wasn't invited to such a big occasion by the celebrants soon discovers he or she was considered an enemy. But even when you invite some the D-day would meet them in the farm harvesting mature plantains or palm nuts. Others wouldn't miss it because of the surplus liquor and food. And the ingredients for gossip.

There were lots of drinks which ranged from Schnapps, locally brewed gin called Ogogoro or Sapele water and a few dozens bottles of beer. Small saucers containing kolanuts were placed on top of all the tables.

From the corner he was sitting, Efe Oviri could see his father and uncles chatting and bursting into laughter while they swallowed yellowish balls of Usi and Oghwo-ewwri soup. It was the favourite delicacy of the people. Every special occasion called for it and banga soup. Even the white men working for B.P would tell you so. They were seldom seen in Chief's homes licking their fingers, belching out and loud and whispering 'this is delicious' to each other.

He watched on with two things on his mind. Things he could not be man enough to say. Things that mattered to, maybe, him alone and nobody else. Especially this very moment. A few days back he had witnessed the introduction ceremony which also went well. The woman his father was marrying was a very pretty one that would capture the eyes of any man. She had black glossy long hair that fell back at her nape. Her eyes were big and moony. Her skin was fair and lovely. She was even taller than his father. Rumour had it that she was from the big rivers – yes, from Olokun. There was something about her he disliked but he was not yet sure about his doubts. Maybe they were true or false, time would tell.

He knew she was marrying his father because they've all been told that the oil company would be giving money to the family every month or year as royalties. And that would make him richer. From looks he could tell his father should be twice as old as her. Or maybe more. Thrice was also a distant possibility. How stupid of her! Anyway, it was none of his business if she chose to marry a man as old as the fabled Methuselah. The excited guests suddenly tore his mind from the chain of thoughts. He turned around to see what was exciting them. A popular local musician invited to entertain the guests had started performing. His dancers were young girls in two piece skirt and blouses and had Sekere tied around their ankle, which gave out beautiful sound as their feet stamped on the ground. The unmistakable white handkerchiefs were also in both hands. And with them they did two things, entertain, and fan themselves. The lead vocalist began singing.

The dancers bodies swayed and moved so gracefully as if there wasn't a single bone in them. The guests were all shouting, hailing and applauding. Efe swore he had never seen any one danced like that before. Never, until this moment. He placed his hands against his chest and watched on, enthralled.

Michael Oviri, accompanied by his brothers and his freshly married wife, headed for the platform. They all were dressed in the traditional men's attire; bowl hats donned over heads, long-sleeved lace shirts, colourful wrappers and British style or locally carved walking stick.

Well-wishers joined the dancing and hailing as they approached the couple. Then came a shower of money all around them. Ese, Efe's elder sister and her siblings engaged themselves in collecting the money from the floor.

The party went on for more than six hours, stretching into the early hours of the following day. Every body had every muscle exercised. A quarter part of the guest had gone home, tired and exhausted, but more important, entertained and satisfied. Others were found here and there sleeping on their seats. About a dozen relatives were inside the main building passing the night away too. It may be three or more hours before they depart.

Suddenly a man stepped inside the house. He looked spent and drunk. His eyes glowed like red-hot coal. And his walking stick swayed in his hand. He staggered forward and stopped. His eyes searched the entire house. There were lots of people in the house and he could not easily figure out who or what he was looking for.

Alero, Efe's mother raised her head and turned to ask what he was looking for. But before she could speak, the man had already blurted out. "Shame...!!"

It was a relative that first reacted. "What is the problem?"

The drunken man burst into loud laughter. "Orhue! You are madding!"

Everybody that was awake burst into laughter.

"No, no, no. This is s-e-r-i-o-u-s matter. Your father is a fool." He said, and fell to the ground. For a moment there was a brief eclipse around him.

Efe was terribly angered by those words and sprang to his feet.

"What did you say?"

"Shut up ya mouth! You are even speak in Oyibo to me?" He dragged himself up, assisted by his walking-stick. "See, I know just what to do."

Alero said to him, "Why do you like troubling people? Is it not enough for you to come here, drink our liquor, eat our food and say hurtful things to us? Please leave now!"

"No, let me tell this boy something," he protested, "I went to Horse – ford University. Back there in Noko, where white men came from."

"Horse- ford!!!" A relative retorted.

Everybody burst into laughter again. It was really getting entertaining. And new spectators were joining in by the minute as they woke up from sleep.

"You are all laughing?" He said, and farted. A bad one.

Five people got up, hurrying to leave the house as fast as they could, covering their nostrils with their hand. One turned back and cursed, "stupid good-for-nothing old man!"

"Yes. Call me whatever. But I am better than your brother. That cold coward who's farmland now belong to the white people. White men that came from afar off.

Nincompoop. A terrestrial habitat!"

"Enough!" Alero yelled at him, embarrassed by the drunken man's big grammar and wit.

"I won't stop. You are but a woman. And a woman has no say where men are talking." He cleared his throat with a cough and added, "They are all catastrophic mesmerism! Bloody thwarts!"

Alero wanted to hit him with her clenched fist, but thought otherwise, hissed and walked out of the house. Once outside she started looking for people who could help carry the William out of the house.

Inside, the drunken man continued, "Let me tell you Efe, your father is..."

"Old man," Efe cut him short, "I will not tolerate any of this anymore. Please go away. Go away and leave us in peace."

The drunkard laughed. "P-e-a-c-e? We shall know no peace in this land anymore.

The peace our fathers and ancestors once had have been taken away." He belched, staggered to the door and pointed out. "Look afar off. See that flare up in the air? That BP flare is a sign of anger. There will be anger in the land. Vanity upon vanity is vanity. Moses said that in the good book."

"That's a lie. It was Solomon. You are drunk. Go home and sleep." Efe replied with a fiery temper.

"Yes. It's enough. Go home and sleep William." A relative added, his face smoking with anger.

William laughed and staggered forward, holding the frame of the door with a hand, leaning on it for support. "I am drunk. Yes, I agree. But I still remain wise. You are all fools. This sweetness you are tasting in your tongue today will soon go away and leave you in pain. Vanity upon Vanity is Vanity."

Efe was angry. He shouted, "Leave us a-lo-n-e!"

"Yes, I will. But please tell you father to keep his manhood between his lap. If they creep too far, things would only get worse. Life is changing."

"Thank you. But go away!" Efe shouted at him angrily. William belched, shook his head in pain and opened the curtain. He made a roaring noise and vomited at the doorway. Efe couldn't stand the ugly sight and ran into the bedroom.

Three hefty young men in their late twenties accompanied Efe's mother back. They were all heavily built and walked like warriors. As they approached their powerful pectorals shook with energy. They followed right behind her like bodyguards. Alero pointed at the drunken man. "That's him. The man who did not wish us well. The man who came here only to eat our food and curse us. Please carry him out of the compound."

He was sitting on the ground, vomiting and urinating in his wrappers. It was quite an ugly sight. Once the young men saw how dirty he looked, the excitement to demonstrate their might dissolved.

"What are you waiting for?" Alero questioned.

"Nothing." The elder most one replied.

"So carry him now."

"But look at the way he is. He is too..."

"Please I beg of you. He is a disgraceful sight here. Our guests have already been offended. Please, biko, help me to carry him out of here."

They leaned forward, two at his back and two at his feet. They grabbed him and began pulling him off the ground. Just then the drunkard began to resist, with all his might. He wriggled and jerked, and cursed. Yet he could not break loose. Then a thought occurred to him and quickly he jerked his head forward and spat on one of the young men's face. That act freed his right hand as the boy whose face he spat on angrily let go and turned around to leave, irritated.

Then he turned around and bit the other youngman's hand, his teeth digging deep into the boy's flesh as if he were a kind of untamed mad dog. The boy screamed a loud one that stiffened every on-looker, and forced his hand out of the drunkard's mouth. At first, it was a deep white cut, but soon it turned red. The blood rushed out very freely.

"Hey God, this madman has bitten me!" He started panicking, "Ughwu na!"

"Sorry, Sorry" Others tried to console him.

"Sorry?" he asked them angrily. "I said a madman has bitten me! O my god! See how they are looking at me!"

"What do I do? Somebody please tell me. Oh..."

"Oshare, don't panic. He is not mad. He's only drunk. Believe me". A man tried to console him.

"Are you sure? But Jesus, look at his rotten teeth Eh..."

Later that morning Efe went to a corner and started recollecting the frenzied scene the drunken man had created. He was just an enemy of progress, he thought. His lips spread and a soft smile appeared on his face. Then, he burst into laughter. It was clear the memories of the last scene William created was amusing him. It was strange but also funny. It took a while before the smile went away. It went and left him feeling sad.

Somehow he had realized William could be drunk, but truly not wrong. Everything he had said now seemed right. 'Tell your father to keep his manhood between his lap, if they creep too far things would only get worse,' he remembered this one quite clearly. The statement came back word for word.

He began to worry. A pensive moment stole his attention away from his surrounding. A friend waved at him from a distance. He didn't see him but he seemed to be staring right at him.

"Why is Papa marrying again? Isn't it uncalled for?" He soliloquized "I think the money the oil company gave to the council of elders is deceiving him."

"Efe!" Alero called from within the house.

"Ma," he answered, at the top of his voice and went in.

CHAPTER FIVE

At dawn the remaining guests were gone leaving only the Oviri family and a few friends and neighbours to do the cleaning. The boys took the heavier task carrying chairs, tables, and empty crates of drinks away from the frontyard to wherever they got them from. The girls gathered plates, glasses, spoons and the big pots together and engaged themselves in washing. The younger girls in the family would do the sweeping of the compound once the boys cleared the chairs completely.

It was a different scene now. All the loud music, the different faces and characters that had flavoured

the arena with different spices were now gone. They were gone but the sweet and bitter tales they left behind would be enough issues for the young women to gossip about till the following market day. The inspiring dancers the musician brought would be the sweetest memory to relish, and the biggest topic to discuss.

Michael Oviri woke up from his sleep. He turned around and saw his newly-wed young and beautiful wife lying next to him. Well, thank God it wasn't all a dream, he thought. He carefully let himself out of the bed, not wanting to wake up the sleeping beauty. He stretched his body and felt pains in every joint. He almost cried out loud. But as a man, he had to bear worse pain without tears.

He started recollecting his dreams, a recreation of everything that had happened the previous night, re-told by a third party, a witness who had watched it all from a different angle. Someone who had seen other things his eyes didn't see. But he must confess that the witness must be a bad one, because he had only succeeded in telling the story haphazardly. He went to a corner and reached for a bottle of gin, turned off the cover and poured himself a shot. He went to the doorstep and started giving thanks to God for a successful after-marriage party and made supplications for peace and prosperity for his family. He poured shots of the liquor thrice to the floor and drank the rest. It was the traditional way of talking to God. And every morning people all through the land did the same, except for the new converts of Jehovah's Witnesses who had rejected their fathers' customs and followed the white man's.

Outside, the children, one after the other as he went round the compound. His head ached slightly, but that would be taken care of once he took his morning bath. Maybe the way he slept encouraged the ache to drag on till the morning. Or maybe not, but all the same, it would soon go away.

"Igho, come here," he said.

"Sir," the boy said and ran up to him.

"Haven't I told you a dozen times not to wear any of those attire you were putting on yesterday?"

"Papa, but it belongs to Grandpa. And that makes it mine too. Or is it a crime to...."

"Will you shut up your dirty mouth! What does all those rotten words you are saying mean?"

Igho was frightened by his father's response. "I'm sorry, Papa," he said apologetically.

"Feel sorry for yourself because the next time I see you in one of those cloths, I will break your head in two parts. Do you understand me?"

"Yes Papa," Igho said and left in a sullen mood. He still could not understand why he didn't have the right to put on any of his own late grandpa's cloths. Well, maybe they were some kind of treasure that was only better off cherished than worn. Someday he would understand.

Michael Oviri went to the general house and sat himself down in the front yard. He adjusted the white underwear, which was falling off his shoulders and started biting hard on his chewing stick. This was one place he really hated to be at times because it was where he got most of the complains. If it weren't the children fighting, it would be the wives quarrelling. And if it wasn't any one of those, then, it had to be a nagging plea for money to buy this or that item. He would prefer not coming here in the morning, for the exigencies of his position as head of a polygamous family He has come to realize that as a man he needn't shy away from his problems. He has to deal with them as they come.

The sweet thoughts of his new wife breezed through his head and he relaxed into the bamboo chair to savour it. But just then, Onome, the second wife approached him. He

could see it on her face that she was not a bit happy about his new wife. 'Jealous woman' he murmured and called out to one of his kids.

Onome greeted him, not a smile on her face.

"Is that how you greet the man in your life?"

"Eh eh, what is wrong with my greeting again? Or is it a crime to great one's husband again?"

"Thank you," he said bluntly and frowned. "So what is it you are looking for this morning?"

She sighed and sat herself down; and started figuring out how to present her request.

"I said what do you want from me this morning."

"I want my money." Was all she found herself saying.

"Shuo, which money again? When did I start owing you?"

"Your guests took two extra gallons of Ogororo from my...."

"Two extra gallons? Onome are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Michael cleared his throat and spat on the ground. He was thinking hard. Certainly, there was no reason why the guests should exhaust the whole Jerry cans of Ogororo and still request for two more from this woman. But how does he prove it?

"Onome," he called to her attention.

"Sir" She answered grumbling inaudibly.

"I have heard you. I will see to that later."

She sprang up in fury. "No way! I need the money now!"

"Onome, I said I will give it to you later. Just let me confirm your claim."

"I need the money now oh. Otherwise there will be trouble in this house. You didn't know how small your pocket was before you decided to marry another woman."

"Onome!"

CHAPTER SIX

Efe Oviri had to trek about ten kilometers to school every working day. Going to school has become a painful experience to every youth in the community. There was no other faster means of transportation in the village than bicycles. Even then only very few farmers could afford to have just one. A family who could boast of three bicycles was a wealthy one.

Every pupil had to trek their way to school excepting few ones whose parents happened to be rubber plantation owners, or a member of ruling council of chiefs. The road to school was a woody one, just a path running through the forest. It was

always fearsome, frightening and infested with flies during the early hours of the morning. Efe hated the routine especially with the flies, buzzing irritatingly in his ears, and perching on his cloths as he trekked down. No matter how hard he tried to push them away, they kept coming back.

He had been privileged to own a bicycle that his father bought from the chief blacksmith of the village to help ease his long trip to school. But that privilege had been taken away when a group of hungry-looking strangers appeared on his way to school one fateful day and stole it away.

He wondered why there was no secondary school in his own village. Why did he, and the rest of the youth of the land had to go as far as ten kilometers to get taught. Why couldn't the government build a secondary school for the people. His community had given the government their land and support to help them build a secondary school yet they had ignored it all. For about twenty years the place had been abandoned, only a few hundreds of blocks had been brought there, and after that nothing. His father, along with other Chiefs of the land had written countless number of letters, which ended in garbage cans in the governments' office. Today rumour would carry it that they are coming tomorrow to build it. Tomorrow would come and go in vain. Nothing would be touched.

The village head had sent many pupils repeatedly to clear the bushes so the government people would be reminded that the people's request was yet to be met. But all

that meant nothing. It just appeared it was better to forget that the government ever promised to build them a secondary school than to hope on an empty promise.

A teacher met him by the gate. The one the students dreaded so much and had nicknamed Mr. Flog-and-die. You never see him around without a cane in his hand. He was a tall thin man in his late thirties. His hair was like a big black ball. His eyes were always red. If there was an award for the most-wicked teacher Mr. Rolands would be the one to pick it each passing year - so the student thought.

"Hey you, are you just coming to school?"

A chilly feeling caught Efe's heart. He didn't know what to say. Should he say Yes or No? He knew quite well whichever way he went, Mr. Rolands would still find fault in it.

"I asked you a question. Are you deaf?"

"No sir," Efe said, his knee turning to jelly.

"Are you just coming to school? He repeated emphatically

"Yes - Sir"

"Do you have a wristwatch?"

"No, Sir," Efe replied almost inaudibly.

"I see," he said, "but I'll help you though" He pushed his hand forward and tilted his hand so Efe could see the time on his wristwatch. "What is the time?"

"It's five-minutes-after eight O'clock."

Mr. Rolands smiled and started tapping the cane on his open palm. "You know what that means?"

"No," He replied, now too scared to look at Mr. Rolands' frightful face.

"That means you are late. And the new rule is War against indiscipline. Now give me your hand!"

Efe was gripped by fear. He was only five minutes late and this man was going to punish him. He backed away. Slowly.

"Do you want to run?" Mr. Rolands threatened.

"Please Sir, I come from very far - the other village. I ..."

"What has that got to do with the fact that you are late? Now give me your hand!"

He reached for the boy's hand and held it tightly.

Whapp! Whapp!! Whapp!!!

“Please! Please! Please!” Efe started sobbing, and trying as hard as possible to defend himself from the cane.

Later that afternoon found Efe under a cherry tree. Every part of his body hurt like hell. Blood stained patches were all over his hand. Each time he looked at them a great pain erupted inside him.

‘How could Mr. Flog-and-die be so wicked’ he thought ‘I was only five minutes late. Couldn’t he have shown a little mercy?’

“Hey Efe, what are you doing sitting there alone?” A female friend of his called from behind.

He turned around and looked at her. “I’m just trying to find sometime for myself. I need a little time all alone.”

She smiled. “What happened to your hands?”

“It’s Mr. Flog-and-die.”

She was still surprised by the reddish patches that were all over the boy’s fair skin.

She moved closer and took his hand tilting it around to see how much of it were there.

“God! This man must be a devil. What did you do wrong?”

“Nothing”

“Nothing? Come on, he wouldn’t have punished you for nothing? You must have done something really bad.”

Efe laughed. “I was five minutes late to school this morning. Instead of him to consider the long distance I had to trek down to school and forgive me, he decided to war against the indiscipline in me.”

“Are you sure he did all this to you because you came late? Only five minutes?”

“Diana, you may as well forget it if you don’t believe me”

“No, don’t take it like that. Its just hard to believe.” She said and sat down beside him. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“Thanks anyway.” Efe said and sank into his thoughts Diana waited a minute or two expecting him to say something but he just kept quiet. She knew his mind was far away

gone. He was always like that; always wanting to carry the problems of the world on his back.

“Efe, what are you thinking about this time?”

“Mr. Flog-and-die”

She burst into an uncontrolled laughter. “What do you want to do to him? Wait for him at the bushy path and pour devil beans all over him?”

Efe laughed at the suggestion. He had contemplated that before but either the courage evaporated at jet-speed, or doing so was considered useless.

“No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Well, because in a way I don’t blame him.”

She was a little surprised by his response. How couldn’t he blame Mr. Rolands for all this wickedness? Every pupil in this school had something to blame him for. A handful of students had even stopped coming to school because of him. He was just too wicked with the cane.

“Who then do you blame? Do you blame yourself?”

“I blame the government!”

She laughed. “Oh, Efe. You could be so funny at times. What has the government got to do with the pain inflicted on your by Mr. Flog-and-die? Are you blaming the government for employing him? Of course not. Or did the government delay you on your way to school this morning?”

“I tell you this.” Efe said and shifted himself forward. His back was hurting again as

it pressed hard against the cherry tree.

“If the government had given us a secondary school in our own land as they have promised, I wouldn’t be here today hurting all over because I came a couple of minutes late to school.”

Diana had a long pensive moment on his words. “You know, I think you are right. You have this deep way of reasoning.”

She tapped his hand, to call his attention back to her. “Come to think of it, why didn’t they fulfill their promises?”

“I don’t know. Every thing they promised was never done. They told our fathers, during the time they were doing their exploration in the land, that our land would become like England. But up to this day we’ve not seen any difference. Nothing has changed.”

“Maybe they haven’t got the means to...”

“Don’t be stupid, Diana. The means is right there. They are just being wicked. Don’t you see we don’t even have a general hospital?”

“Yes, I now think they are wicked.” She finally agreed after a pensive moment.

Efe laughed, a sarcastic one. “Now that I’ve grown up. I now realize they took away our great farmlands from my fathers for a token fee. For peanuts. Oh, how I wish I could...”

“Did they?”

“Yes. We used to own that land where those big oil companies’ machines and tanks are. My father said so.”

“Well let’s hope and pray that God will touch their hearts.”

Efe laughed again. “I think somebody needs to stand up to them.”

“Who did you say did this to you?” Michael Oviri asked angrily.

Efe trembled. He did not want to cause any more trouble. Especially between him and Mr. Rolands. He feared it would only make the teacher hate him the more. “I fell off a tree Papa,” he lied.

“Don’t be stupid!” His father barked at him. He reached out a hand, grabbed his son by the arm, and pulled him closer. “I said which mad teacher did this to you?”

“It’s – It’s Mr. Rolands.”

“What did you do wrong.? Tell me now!”

“Nothing. I got to school five minutes late – because I had to take the latex to the rubber-merchant first.”

“What? He must be a mad man. By tomorrow, we’ll march down to the school. He’s going to be sorry for this.”

Efe started murmuring something.

“What are you saying?” He barked at him.

“I-I said it wouldn’t be necessary Papa.”

“Why? Have you been telling ties?”

“No.” Efe said and stepped backwards. “The solution lies in...”

“What solution? Speak, let me hear from you.”

“We need our own secondary school here. So we won’t have to trek kilometers to school everyday.”

Michael felt ashamed. He remembered those days when his father and the rest members of the council of Chiefs, and the people of the land had been promised. He remembered how happy they felt when the town crier announced the success of the exploration. He knew the people got happy because the oil-people had promised so much. But over the years nothing had been done. Even the meager royalty they pay was done by force. Not as a matter of necessity. He thought about the big farmlands and the fishing sites his father Ovie had given up to the oil-people. And shook his head.

“Well,” he said, suddenly finding it hard to look into his boy’s eyes. “Go inside and have your meal. I think I agree with you.” He had noticed his boy was an intelligent one. ‘He reasons like a man’ he thought. ‘We need youths like this in this land. Maybe when they are grown they would change things.’

His strong belief in the future of his family and people ebbed. Things have been so stagnant. The way the village looked when he was about the age of Efe was still how it looked now that he was a grown man. Nothing has changed. People once fetched water from the stream, but later the oil-people dug a borehole and provided clean water for the people. That really didn’t mean much villagers whose home was far off because they had to carry heavy Jerry cans over long distance. Again even to those the small water project benefited, it only lasted for a couple of years. Today the water project is a mess. Nobody cares to revive it. People now drink from shallow wells and unhealthy stream water.

He has determined to give the best of education to his kids. Education, he believed was the light of the world. It was because there were very few bold educated people in the

land that the government and the oil-people had been able to deceive the people. Maybe, someday, people like Efe would make the difference.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On the evening of the following market day elders of the village came to the Oviri’s compound to meet him. They were dressed in plain white underwear mostly, and wrappers with sandals on their feet. From the look on their faces Efe who was sitting at a corner, ready to eavesdrop on them, could tell that they were here to discuss something very pressing. He tried to figure out what it could be but somehow every idea that came up in his mind seemed to carry the same weight. There was not even a hint or clue that could have made him determine which of the dozen possibilities was the right one. He decided not to worry himself about it. He would hide in that corner and eavesdrop on them.

His father came from behind and tapped him. “What are you doing here Efe?”

He was shocked. And began to stammer, “I-I-I was just...”

“Curiosity kills a cat;” his father warned and stared blankly at him. “Now go inside, get me my adjudju and disappear from here, straight to your mother’s hut. She’ll be needing you.”

“Yes Papa.” Efe said and went to look for what he was asked to fetch. He still had the desire to know what these men were about to discuss. He knew just what to do. He would make a u-turn from the backyard of his mother’s hut and come back, through the back to his fathers’ hut and listen to their discussion.

Michael joined the rest of the elders.

The youngest of them was called on to pray for them as they opened the meeting.

He was a very thin man. His skin was also very dark. His flesh clung tightly to his bones. His eyes had turned reddish due to the adversary brought by poverty and hardship. He picked up a bottle of Ogogoro and a saucer of Kolanuts and gave thanks to the gods and made libation by tossing, tossed a small quantity of the liquor to the bare earth and heard the rest of the elders said “Ise!!” He finally set the bottle down on the table.

Michael Oviri began the meeting without much ceremony. “Elders of our land, what we’ve come here to discourse today again, is the failure of the government and the oil companies to meet up to their promise. Promises are debts, as our people say. The

government is owing this land all the good things they promised.” He was now the

secretary of the council of elders. A position he gained because of his late father. "I think we have to go back to Benin City. Let's go and remind them once more." Oritsetimehin said.

"Do we really need to go there again?"

"Would they hear us? Haven't we been there enough?"

Michael cut in. "It is not for the sake of going there that we are here today." When he spoke he did with the confidence of his late father who used to be the head of the elders.

"Ehen? So why then are we here?"

"You see, something really hurtful prompted me to call this meeting up today." He paused for emphasis and watched the rest of the elders settle down attentively. "Just a few days ago, Efe my first son came back home with wounds caused by water cane, all over his body. He was mercilessly dealt with by a teacher in the school. I - " His voice dragged away as he surprisingly heard hisses and whispers.

"You can't call the elders of this land to discuss that? This is an issue you could have handled yourself. You could have gone to the school and either make a complain or deal with the mad teacher as you please." The deputy head of the council of elders commented. Michael smiled. He wasn't the least bit bothered by the direct punch that had been thrown at his face. He just remained calm and watched others nodding their heads to what Oritsetimehin had said. When the elders finally calmed down he began speaking, "You see it is a shame that a man of your position and calibre couldn't have as much patience as it is required to let me die before you get to bury me. The restless fish will no sooner find itself in the fisherman's net"

The returned verbal missile went straight through the other man's heart. He felt the blow and shamefully turned dumb.

"I couldn't have stupidly requested for the king of the land to come and help me solve my family problems? What we are here to discuss is something that concerns everyone of us. Not me alone!"

Efe did as he had planned. He went to an open window that was right behind the meeting ground. His ears were to the ground waiting to be fed. His heart thumped heavily. He was afraid of being found by his father. He knew quite well how vehement his father could be once any of his children directly disobeyed him.

"Efe was massively punished because he arrived five-minutes late to school that day. That is because he had to trek several kilometers to the next village every morning. So do your children. And thank the gods, they too had helplessly been suffering such punishment too. The point is we can't sit down, and fold our hands anymore and watch this land grow old without even a secondary school or a hospital.

"Toju my son too, was attacked by a bush-pig on his way to school because he had to go very early." Another man chipped in. "It cost us everything we had to take him to the hospital in Benin City."

"You see now? How long can we take this?" Michael asked.

"Yes this is an insult to this land. We must do something now! Or forever keep our peace."

"That brings us to the question – what do we do?" The head of the elders asked.

A long pensive moment followed. Nobody spoke a word. They seemed to have sunk deep into their thoughts. Everyone needed the right answer, but answers like this was not easy to come by.

"Lets write to them again." A man suggested.

"They will ignore it." Michael was quick to speak this time.

"Lets then go there personally. Maybe they'll respect our presence."

"That would be fine but we need to table the matters before the king tomorrow morning before anything else."

“Yes I like to say the Ovie is not doing much about this.” A man complained.

“What do you mean? The king of the land had written many letters to the government but nobody cared to do anything positive. All they do is reply him with another strings of promises.” Michael explained.

“Well, I don’t blame him. I think he is doing what he should do.”

“Eh, I heard a rumour that each time those replies came a token gift was added. Should we call this bribe?”

Michael turned to face the speaker. “Is that true?”

Nobody gave an answer to his question.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The morning was cold. The drizzle had even worsened the problem. The soft sound of the light drops of rain drummed against the old galvanized iron roofing sheets. Only a few homes had this over their roof. Others were still covered by old fibrous raffia thatches – which leaked disappointingly especially during the heavy rains in the rainy season. The rooster had already crowed more than three times, and the stars were gradually fading away as the dawn approached.

Michael Oviri wandered through the swamp trying to gather all the hooks, traps and nets he had placed in strategic locations the previous night. The wetness of the shrubs irritated him. It felt too cold. Yet he slashed his way through with the cutlass in his hand. The soft wind threatened to put out the hurricane lamp he was carrying. But somehow it managed to survive.

There was something pungent about the air. He could smell it, but sometimes the forest preferred being pungent, especially after a light rain. Otherwise, it could be an omen, a sign of the presence of the fairy the people called Aziza. It was a very terrifying spirit that wandered through the forest during the early dark hours of the day. Those who have seen it said it has just one big leg with which it hopped around Cherry or Orange trees. It always bumped into the trees, causing all the ripe fruits to fall off the branches to the ground. And when it did, the loud sound reverberated through the thick forest, carrying its terror along. Michael stopped walking, looked around the vicinity. He listened to the whispers of the forest. The tears of the land were all over the big-leaved shrubs of the forest. After being convinced there were no heavy thumps of the feet of the one-legged spirit, distant or near, as deceptive as it could be at times, he decided to continue gathering.

Michael was a bit confused. He noticed the hooks hadn’t done well. The catch from the nets was however excellent. What wonder, he thought, nature could get so funny atimes that you end up laughing at yourself.

There was a splashing sound in the distance, where the stream was. He stooped low and strained his eyes to see. A flicker of light from the distance aided him. He could make

out distant images in the dimly lit morning. It was a couple of youngsters fetching water from the stream. The water project had collapsed; and people had now turned back to the stream for drinking water.

He turned around and started tracing his way back. He would ask his new wife to prepare a very spicy pepper soup with the biggest fish he caught once he got home. At least that would chase away the cold. He smiled, imagining things only he could tell.

The sun had reached the climax of its ascension along the horizon. The heat had

done well, evaporating the water left over by the early morning drizzle which the muddy earth wouldn't allow to permeate. Bright reflections of the sun's ray were cast back to the air by the silvery water surface.

A group of fishermen were walking down the narrow path that led to the stream. They carried their nets beneath their arm-pit with one hand, while the other held a calabash.

They appeared happy chatting over the party they had the previous night, the fun, the women and booze. And lastly the hangover they had suffered during the early hours of the day.

"Never again will I drink that much alcohol." The youngest of the group swore. His eyes narrowed.

The others burst into laughter.

"How did you feel throughout the night?"

He shook his head regretfully. "You are asking? I felt like the Armageddon the Jehovah Witness people sing about had come. The earth was quaking, my legs quivered like a leaf under the influence of a strong wind. The skies rolled and rolled," he paused to take a short laughter. "And you know what hurt me most?"

"No."

"I ended up vomiting my stomach all over the house."

The rest of the group burst into laughter again.

"This is not a laughing matter," Ogaga said pointedly. They turned their heads to face him.

"I swear to God, I won't ever take more than a glass of Ogogoro again. It is poison to the human mind and body."

"Ogaga is a new comer to this game" Keme said and burst into laughter. "What about beer? Would you stop drinking beer too?"

"They are all poison." Ogaga declared. "I think you people should really cut down on drinking. It is a bad habit."

"Shut up. Don't talk like a small boy? Beer is for the big men. Just say you cannot afford it." Keme replied.

"Udi will take your mind off the troubles of this world. You drink away your troubles and sorrow. That's where we find solace." Abednego said.

"That's cowardice." Ogaga stated.

"What do you mean?"

Ogaga at first didn't know what else to say. He didn't know what the other man didn't understand about his statement.

"A man that runs away from his problem by hiding behind the intoxicating power of alcohol is a coward."

"Ogaga don't insult me," Abednego warned.

"What do you mean?" Ogaga questioned bravely.

"I said don't insult me!"

"What if I did? What would you do?"

Abednego dropped his calabash and pointed his cutlass dangerously at Ogaga.

"Don't make me get mad at you."

"Get mad! What would you do." Ogaga dropped his calabash and stood poised.

Ready for the challenge.

"What do you want to do? You want to fight an Ogbu's son? Ehh!" Abednego bragged proudly.

"No, no, no. This does not call for a fight" others advised.

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