

KASIMAWO

When Kaşimawo had let the Adenubi siblings convince her to abandon her father's compound and follow them into the *Ilẹ̀ òfo* she had not expected to come face-to-face with a *kpelekpe*. She wished she had rolled her eyes when the Adenubi siblings had told her they were the key to saving *Ilẹ̀ alawọ ewe*, her village. She wished she had scoffed and turned back to her shared hut with Ifeosun when Fehintola had said that the gods had been speaking to her or when Adetola had claimed he had been getting dreams regarding the downfall of the place she called home. After all, they were just city kids. What did they know of the will of the gods?

But Kasimawo had to admit a part of her had wanted to believe them. She at least knew one thing they had said was true, the land was contaminated. The whole village knew this and her father, the village *babalawo*, had spent weeks trying to appease and communicate with the gods to no avail. If they were telling the truth then she could save her family. And if they were lying? Well surely her father wouldn't disown his most beloved daughter, right? But truth be told Kaşimawo had other reasons for leaving home. After she had shown her family her totem at the ripe age of seven and proven she would bring no more grief to her mother by dying young as most *abikuns* did, she had made her parents promise they would allow her to attend school and not marry her off until she was eighteen. This had been an easy decision for her parents to make as the circumstances surrounding Kaşimawo's birth had easily made her the apple of her parents' eyes. She had enjoyed this promise, while her mates had been married off to suitors, her suitors had been chased away and her education furthered. But that was all coming to a stop. Kaşimawo was no fool and had begun to notice how her parents entertained suitors longer, and there was no shortage of suitors. Kaşimawo was easily the prettiest girl in the village. Her smooth fair skin, long hair that was always neatly plaited and her stunning, almost ethereal, features made sure of that. She was tall. Taller than the other girls in the village and that seemed to add to her appeal. It didn't help that her eighteenth birthday was in exactly three weeks. So when Fehintola and Adetola had come to her to accompany them on their three-week-long mission, although she had been exceedingly skeptical, she had appreciated the opportunity to stall the upcoming marriage plans and figure out how to escape them. And the Adenubi boy wasn't bad looking either.

Not for the first time since they set off, she was beginning to wish she had stayed home.

Kaşimawo dug her fingernails into her palms, it was all she could do to keep from screaming. Adetola stared at her curiously while Fehintola, in her usual cheerful manner, smiled at the shape shifting were-hyena

"Good evening ma," Fehintola said, oblivious to the danger ahead.

"Good evening *omọ mi*" The hyena replied. If Kaşimawo thought she was going to scream before, she was certain she was going to shriek now. The voice coming from the hyena disguised as the old lady was the same one that had plagued her for weeks, urging her to come into the forest serving as a pathway to the *Ipo-okú* and claim her true being. What made it worse though was while the hyena spoke to Fehintola, it never took its eyes off her.

"Kaşı, what's wrong?" Adetola whispered, inching closer to her. Before she could respond, the old lady hyena spread its lips into an uneasy grin, revealing its fangs before releasing a haunting, terrible howl. Fehintola shrieked and leaped back. Adetola instinctively reached to shield his sister and Kaşimawo, putting himself between them and the were-hyena, but the hyena kept its eyes on Kaşimawo

"Kaşimawo. We've been waiting for you." Without any warning, the *kpelekpe* began to transform back to its original form. It grew and grew until it was almost as tall as she was. The clothes it had been wearing melted away into brown, spotted fur. Its nose lengthened into a snout. The Adenubi siblings couldn't believe the previous old lady had turned into a hyena. Kaşimawo couldn't believe it was this hyena that had been frequenting her dreams and calling out to her during the day.

"What do you want?" Adetola spoke up, trying to be the brave one of the group as he was the man. Normally Kaşimawo and Fehintola would have teased him for this but they were both terrified and grateful for his lack of fear.

The *kpelekpe* ignored him and smiled at Kaşimawo menacingly. She didn't smile back and instead tried to avoid its gaze. Anybody who knew anything knew that the *kpelekpe* was a dangerous creature to encounter. Like the sirens that lured seamen to their deaths, the *kpelekpe* convinced people to follow it into the forest and devoured them. Kaşimawo held back a groan and once again internally cursed the Adenubi siblings. Of course, she had not thought of this before agreeing to follow them on their journey. Her mind had been focused on her coming age and what it brought with it.

"Kaşimawo. Speak to me". She frowned as its mouth did not move yet she heard its voice as clear as day. She supposed she didn't have much of a choice. The creature showed no sign of leaving and it didn't take its eyes off her either. Slowly, she emerged from her hiding place behind Adetola, lightly brushing his hand away as he tried to hold her back, and stood as tall as she could despite the fear settling in her stomach. She lifted her head high and regarded it as though it was beneath her.

"What do you want from me? How do you know my name?" She hoped her voice didn't betray the terror she was fighting to keep down.

"We have watched you for 18 years waiting patiently for the time to claim you. That time has not yet come but I have been sent to guide you and your companions through this forest." As she mulled over its words she noted how the mouth still did not move as it spoke.

"Watching me? Why have you been watching me? And who sent you to us?" She asked. She heard the crack in her voice and was sure she was doing a terrible job of hiding her fear

"What's going on Kaşı?" Fehintola whispered. The confusion in her voice suggested that only Kaşimawo could hear the *kpelekpe*'s words

"It says it's been watching me my whole life and it was sent to guide us through this cursed forest you and your brother brought me into". She felt bad at how venomous her tone sounded at that last sentence but she could not help how angry and frightened she was. "Are you going to answer me?" She asked the creature, grateful that although it was unnervingly tall she was taller still. The *kpelekpe* regarded them briefly before getting down on all fours and darting away

"Where is it going?" The Adenubi siblings asked anxiously and she couldn't blame them. How could it expect them to follow it if it ran at that speed? And why should she follow an evil creature like that into the forest just because it said so? The *kpelekpes* weren't known for their honesty and kindness. Still, as she regarded the setting sun and thought about the darkness that was about to follow, she decided that she'd rather die in the hands of one evil creature than a thousand. Before she could voice her opinion and suggest they start running Fehintola took off.

"Guys hurry up! That thing may be our way out" Fehintola called over her shoulder as she tried to keep up with the sprinting hyena. Adetola looked at the direction his sister had run before turning to look at Kaşimawo, torn between following his sister and making sure Kaşimawo went with them.

"*Ki awon orişa ran wa lówọ*" She muttered under her breath before turning to Adetola "Aren't you coming?" She asked before running after Fehintola and the *kpelekpe*.

ADETOLA

Adetola knew the face of the were-hyena was going to fuel his nightmares for years to come. He thought he had done a good job of hiding how badly he wanted to scream and hide. That was before Kaşimawo had started communicating with it telepathetically. He was sure he was going to faint then.

Another thing Adetola knew was that he was never going to understand his sister. He knew from the moment he had told her about his dreams that he had made a huge mistake. The way her eyes lit up was enough to let him know that there was trouble ahead. When she told him the gods had been speaking to her and they wanted them and their host's youngest daughter to save the village he had almost told her how crazy she was. But he knew she was right. His sister might not be the best in looking before she leaped but she was smart. Smart enough to know not to joke about things like this. He was smart too. Smart enough to know the gods were not to be ignored. So he had helped her convince Kaşimawo and they had set out on their journey to wherever, hoping it would be as easy as she made it sound. Naturally, he had been wrong. He wanted to bury his head into his hands but he was too busy running.

He did not know how long they had been running. The soles of his feet burning in protest suggested it must have been at least an hour. He didn't know how far away they were from the were-hyena or their destination as he only had Kaşimawo's retreating back to guide him. It felt like hours before Kaşimawo slowed down and then finally stopped running. He caught up to her, fighting the urge to double over, and instead stood while catching his breath. It was something his track coach had taught his team when they first started and he tried to keep it in mind whenever he ran. Not that he had ever run this long. He was too busy gasping for air to notice Kaşimawo didn't seem affected by their lengthy run and was instead watching him with an amused smile on her face.

"Where are we?" Fehintola's voice cut through the air, demanding his attention. He scanned around for her but it was far too dark to see

"Where are you?" He called back hoping she would try to trace his voice but he sensed from the silence that she wasn't coming

"It says we're in its home. We have to wait here till morning before we can continue" Kaşimawo said. He looked around once more but he still couldn't make anything out.

"How do we know it's not going to eat us" Fehintola asked. He wished she had thought of that before running after it.

"It says its reward for bringing us is greater than however we would taste" Kaşimawo answered

"Great" He muttered. Kaşimawo said were-hyena wanted them to follow it. It led them into a slightly brighter part of the home. He could see a bit better here. He watched as the hyena curled into a ball and went to sleep. He needed to go over to his sister and scold her for once again acting without thinking yet something held him back. He watched Kaşimawo as she arranged banana leaves on the ground. She worked silently showing no sign that she was aware of him standing behind her. After she had set down the last of the leaves she stood straight.

"Why are you staring?" The way she had suddenly spoken up startled him, the question made him feel like a young schoolboy who had been caught trying to look up a woman's skirt. He wasn't staring. Well, he supposed he was but he hadn't meant to.

"I'm sorry. I was waiting for you to finish what you were doing" He couldn't believe how awkward he was being. He normally wasn't like this. Usually he walked around with an air of confidence and who could blame him? He was everything they said a man should be and he thought of himself as a man as every nineteen year old does. He stood at a whopping six foot and four inches and all the sports he played did well to complement his body. He had rich dark skin, full dark hair, and captivating features. He was every inch as attractive as his peers, if not more, and had no shortage of girls around him, yet there was something about the lady in front of him that made him falter. He had no feelings for her other than sympathy and guilt, after all his sister and him were the reason why she was sleeping in the middle of a forest rumored to be inhabited by spirits instead of in her shared hut in her father's compound, but he could not explain why he could not seem to be himself around her. Perhaps it was the way she easily made a person feel small, even if they towered over her. There was a certain tilt to her chin and a look in her eyes that could make the wisest of men feel like a babbling fool. Although it was not a look she used often and not one she had used on him it was one that intimidated him nonetheless

"Why?" She had turned to face him now. He couldn't quite make out the look on her face but he could guess by her tone that it wasn't a happy one.

"I wanted to ask you something. How did you know that thing wasn't human?" He had first assumed it was something she saw around the village often and so could differentiate between it and actual humans easily but the fear that had shadowed her face when they ran into it suggested otherwise. She was silent for a long time. So long that he had assumed she didn't hear him and was about to ask again when she spoke.

"Don't call it a thing so it doesn't get offended. It's called a *kpelekpe*, a shapeshifting hyena, and I don't know how I knew what it was. I could feel it. I can't explain it" He nodded though he knew she could barely see him. Another thing plagued him

"How was it speaking to you? And why only you?" He heard her sigh and another long silence followed. After what seemed like hours she spoke up

"I don't know. I don't understand any of this either. It's my first time coming across things like this too" She sounded tired, like she didn't want to talk anymore, so he went off to find his sister. She was fast asleep when he got there or pretending to be, he never really knew with her. He tried calling her name twice but when he got no response he wandered back to Kaşimawo expecting her to be asleep too. He lay down on the hard ground and stared at the sky though

he could barely see it through the thick trees. He thought of how bizarre this whole thing was. He was so deep in thought that he barely heard Kaşımawo speak.

"Tell me a story?" Her voice was soft and although he was shocked that she was awake he obliged. He told her of his life back home. He told her stories from his secondary school days and laughed with her as he recalled all the notoriety he had gained among his teachers who could do nothing because of his perfect grades and golden boy status. He talked and talked until he noticed she had slept off. With a contented smile on his face, he drifted off to sleep too.

And then the dreams came.