

## **How Kings are made**

On nights like these, shadows of the Anglican church with the ruptured roof in the center of the village seem to smother the land and the moon dares not peek through the shrouded sky. The quiet of the dark mirrors the emptiness of the night sky and the hundreds of darker and empty worlds that it hides.

Whenever the moon is missing, the village holds its breath, because they know that such nights are not for the living to roam aimlessly. It's a time when the wind carries whispers of women who meld with black cats, when shadows dance with malevolent grace, and when the very air tastes of bile and uncertainty.

My brother, Tunde's summon came quickly. It started with a call from the village.

This call was not one of the ones that asked when we would be sending daddy's driver to Ifo to collect the corn at the farm, or to complain about the poor harvest that the grazing herders had made worse.

Daddy had hidden himself in the corner of the living room to take the call, away from mummy's prayer mat in the corner of the room and closer to the ugly totem pole that was our book stand, whispering in tiny sprints of seeming gibberish. Short whispers were always a sign in our home that something was wrong; Perhaps the gas cylinder had emptied and there wasn't a dime to spare to refill it, or Tunde's girlfriend was pregnant and her father wouldn't stop calling our mother.

When Tunde had gotten Layo pregnant, my mother had screeched in our living room as though she had been hit by a car. Tunde had remained on his knees mumbling, and Layo sobbed until her nose ran like the stream you could see from our kitchen window.

Mummy would eventually calm down and invite Pastor Joju to speak to 'her son and his fiancée' and begin counseling them for a wedding, whether they wanted one or not.

Pastor Joju had eyebrows that were double mine and bushier than a chicken's tail, both of which constantly flared up whenever he visited us and preached about the dangers of hell while glancing at my father from the corner of his eyes. My father had told us after the pastor's first visit that only women paid attention to men like him.

Several months later, when Layo went missing before the wedding - and we would find out she later had gone to the north to marry a reverend she met on Facebook, Pastor Joju would subject Tunde and my mother to bouts of prayer and fasting to 'bring back our possessed wife'.

It was Pastor Joju who came to mind as my father turned his back to take the phone call. I could just see the pastor's graying eyebrows, and the scowl they would take upon hearing that there was another wedding to be planned, and a couple to be counseled.

I looked at my brother Tunde, he was seated with his back to the wall and the poor lighting made him appear hunched. His face was without expression and lacked the tinge of worry I knew to be present whenever he had baked himself a violent loaf of catastrophe. This call wasn't about him.

*Who is pregnant this time? Grandpa's seventeen-year-old wife?*

I would find that no one was having a child this time, no person anyway. The days that would follow however were pregnant with dark foreboding for me. Perhaps it was our hurried trip in the twilight morning to the bus park in Agege, where my father seemed pressed to ensure that no one saw us board the rickety bus, as though our lives depended on it. Or it could also have been the prevailing clouds that hung over the village in Ifo as we arrived.

Mama Ibeji, our grandmother, was the first one to welcome us as we crested the hill where our small village marked its spot in a clearing. In a faded shirt that once had a church logo and the text 'Let's go fishing', she enveloped me and Tunde in a large hug. She smelled like corn and fermenting cassava, just like the last time.

"Bawo ni, Nibo ni iya re wa?" She said, asking if our mother had come with us. Daddy shook his head, and his eyes seemed to speak to his own mother, it said something he was unsure of and possibly afraid of.

Mummy hated making trips to the village, she claimed that demons lived here and could hide in your bags and return to the city with you following a visit. It was standard practice to leave our bags on the floor outside the apartment doors until Mummy had sprinkled them with anointing oil that Pastor Joju had sold us, and only that seemed strong enough to return the demons home and away from our belongings.

It was not until we were seated on Baba Ibeji's raffia mat and shielded from the sun, inside his hut, that I learnt what had brought us here. A few plastic bowls and plates were before us, all in black and dark blue, with vegetable soups inside of them the only color present in the center of the raffia mat.

"The gods have chosen your brother, you know?" Baba Ibeji said abruptly. He looked me in the eye, and he seemed to burrow into my soul for an answer to a question I knew nothing of.

"Chosen him for what?" I asked, and the ensuing silence appeared to render my question foolish. My father soon spoke up quickly in Yoruba, seeking to please his king of a father. "I haven't told Leye yet."

"I thought so." Baba Ibeji answered in kind. Whenever my father and his father sat together to speak, the air seemed to thicken with an unspoken divide between them both. I knew nothing of what had splintered their relationship, but it was clear to anyone that my grandfather regarded my father just a little above his hunting dogs.

Baba Ibeji turned to me, the animosity he bore my father dissipating like the vapor above a steaming teacup. "Your brother is going to replace me as Oba."

I turned to look at Tunde. Our eyes met briefly, and he nodded in agreement. He never had too much to say of recent, and this was no exception. His oily forehead seemed to glow with pride in the low light of the mud-walled room.

*But what does Tunde know about being a king? Not any more than me, or anyone we know.*

The question bore on my mind until I was sure I had worried a hole into my brain where my concerns about my brother could pool.

It was late evening when Aaliyah crawled into the room where I lay alone. She was the youngest of Baba Ibeji's wives, and hardly ever spoke unless spoken to. Her eyes always looked dull and far away, as though she had lent us her body but her mind and soul had a different life on another plane.

"Tunde is going to become the king?" She asked in Yoruba. It was the first time she and I had ever conversed alone, and I was taken aback. Her voice sounded louder in the enclosure of the room, as though the mud clumps in the walls were her friends, and also itched for her softened voice to pour into the tiny holes the night breathed through like a sleeping child.

I was unsure if I was allowed to speak to her so I cut my words short when I said "Yes."

"Because of stranger with cutlass?" She attempted in English. I turned to her in confusion and repeated her words to her. She nodded without hesitation "They come with cutlass and steal and fight in the evening."

"Who is coming with cutlasses?" I asked. She started to speak but her eyes glanced toward the door in a beat. Someone had entered the room.

It was my brother, he stood resting against the patterned wrapper that served as a door and watched us without a word. When he was convinced we had seen him, he gestured for me to follow him.

I stood to my feet and apologized to Aaliyah with my eyes. She smiled softly, and briefly, I found it hard to swallow. My eyes traveled to the curve of her mouth, and then her bare shoulders before I caught myself and stopped.

I turned to follow my brother without another word.

I followed my brother's footsteps and I realized how they never seemed to follow each other in a straight gait, the result of a failed backflip off the water tank and onto his ankle as a child. We walked toward one of the open flames in a corner next to where the animals were kept and the buzzing of insects would grow, nearly imitating the hum of our refrigerator back home.

Tunde sat on the sand by the fire, and I joined him shortly. My brother's gaze was fixed on the flickering flames that surrounded the sacred circle of glowing embers of burning wood. The torchlight danced in his eyes, casting an ethereal glow that masked the gravity of the night's events. I could feel the weight of the impending burden of Tunde's new status hanging heavily in the air like a storm cloud threatening to unleash its fury.

I cleared my throat, my voice betraying a mix of apprehension and nostalgia. I did not know how to begin but the words spun themselves like a baby spider's web. "Do you remember that cybercafe that used to be in front of the house, back then?"

Tunde's lips curled into a faint smile, a flicker of the mischievous boy I once knew. "Ah, Onome's cyber cafe. How I go forget?"

I nodded, a bittersweet pang tugging at my heart. Onome was a short teenager who was tasked with running his mother's cybercafe when Tunde and I were children. "After you found out how to use the computers without paying for more hours."

Tunde chuckled softly. "When Onome found out, baba come dey shout dey chase us down the street."

"Then I fell into the gutter, that big one with green water," I said, a playful grin tugging at the corners of my lips. I recalled coming home, dripping from head to toe in algae and torn nylon bags. Daddy had asked me to stand outside the house and use the water hose for the car to rinse the muck off me before I even thought of touching the handle of his house door.

Tunde's expression turned contemplative, his gaze distant for a moment. "This Oba thing still never clear for my eyes, because I no even expect am."

I felt a lump form in my throat, understanding the weight of his words. "Be like say you sef don be big boy now."

Tunde's eyes met mine, a mixture of emotions swimming within them. Probably the most I had ever seen in his yellowed eyes. "Omo, but I go just dey this village. Far from everything, i go just dey wear crown dey shake irukere. I hope say I no go regret am."

I placed my hand on his shoulder and noticed for the first time that it shook, but I kept it in place. I hoped he could see it as a gesture of comfort and my solidarity. "You don become big man now, Layo sef go dey reason herself if she hear am."

He offered a half-smile, and his eyes flowed in the light of the flame as his mouth morphed to allow a short laugh. "Shey na you go call am tell her, Ade?"

"Before nko. You na my guy for life."

As the night fire burned lower, a part of me wondered if perhaps in months and years to come and on days when Tunde and I were hundreds of kilometers apart and thought of each other, the shared memories would be what connected us. As the night pressed on, I put trust in those shared memories to bond me to my now-elevated brother.

That night would pass and then an afternoon spent preparing for a coronation ritual before my faith in those memories would be shaken. It was a new night with a seemingly new darkness, this darkness was nothing like the darkness of the night before that would be spotted with lights from time to time. It was near complete darkness, the kind that formed its own faces and shapes to those who had things to run from.

Tonight, girls were not allowed outside and neither were their mothers, not on nights like these. *Nights like these belong in nightmares.*

The night breeze carried the scent of blood and doom. I could not be sure if it was the wind that made me feel as cold as I did or the fear that had its hands around my face. All of its bony fingers were stuffed down my throat keeping me from speaking or breathing.

Tonight, what was left of the lights that kept our rural kingdom lit now cast our own shadows. All of our shadows stretched from our feet to where Tunde lay bare on the ground in the center of our circle. Chiefs, Priests fathers and sons were all dressed in white garbs but all our shadows bore the same contorted black outline.

Tunde lay unmoving on the ground as we waited for the final part of the rites. Ifagbemi leaned over my brother and brandished a short knife from his robe. Quickly and firmly, he slices a killing cut along Tunde's throat and clamps a hand over his mouth to keep him from screaming. A cold shiver ran down my spine and I fought the impulse to leap to stop the bleeding.

In the dim light of the flames, the yellow of the Egusi that Oyedele had cooked for the gods and the red-brown sand soaked in my brother's blood shone the brightest. The lacerated cut across Tunde's throat had bled out onto the sand quickly.

I knew I was supposed to keep my eyes closed while we waited but I lacked the discipline. I needed to see the moment when my brother would rise with his wounds healed. I trusted Ifagbemi, he had never been a man who lied or failed, despite his primitive belief in wooden gods.

Minutes passed and my brother was yet to budge and so my gaze found my grandfather, Baba Ibeji. I looked over his loosely hanging clothes to his left hand where three fingers hung limp, the other two now apparently belonged to the herdsmen. I often wondered what the bandits did with the fingers they tore off the former Oba; Perhaps one of them hung it around his neck for show. Guns and cutlasses could no longer protect the people of our village, and neither could Baba Ibeji. It was for this purpose that we needed a new king.

The kind of king whose magic would make our men vanish before their attackers. The kind of godlike king whose magic swept into our crippled market to draw traders to our village. Tunde was the vessel for such a king.

In the sand where Tunde lay bound by physical ropes and abstract binds of responsibility like Japanese Shibari, he reminded me for the first time of his son, when the little boy was wrapped and swaddled in clothes after his birth.

We stood waiting for the last part of our coronation rituals to bear fruit, for the moment when our king whose throat we had slit would rise from his baptism of blood with the tongues of our forefathers on his lips.

We waited till the sun broke and the morning breeze blew out our torches, but our king never arose. Rather than bring back the ancestors, Tunde had gone on to join them.