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# The Boy Who Would Be Oloye

THE M'YONGO TRIBE think they run everything since enslaving those grassland nomads. Sure, it was a neat trick since nomads are slippery little dudes, but nomads are punks, not warriors like my people. Me and my boys ain't afraid to put in work. Everybody knows the river basin is Nogomo for Life. Nogomo Tribe the greatest. Disrespect us? We come back at you like hungry lions. If M'yongo come around here with that noise, I got my Obe blade for their bitch asses. By Shango, I'll send them all back to Olodumare for rebirth.

The village hopping like always about this time. My shadow says it'll be nightfall soon enough, so everybody trying to get their business done so they can go home and get their grub on. Tourists from the east land trade herbs for prayer-bead necklaces with Tunde's mama, oracle of the goddess Oya, Bringer of the Storm, Destroyer of Our Enemies. Niyi plays his drums outside of Pops's hut. A whole harem of hotties swing through with dried fish baskets on their heads and hips. The tall one is mine, or she will be one day, if she ever notices me. No matter how much I shake my staff her way she ignores me like every other time. Her friends giggle. But that's OK. My time will come. Who wouldn't want to roll with an Omo'ba, a prince? When I'm Oloye, I'll pull all the honeys. Just like Pops.

Fummi calls me with her eyes. I shouldn't let my little sister boss me around, but it's my job to watch out for her since she's different.

"What you want, girl?" I ask.

"Come with me to the river," she says.

"I got stuff to do," I say.

She asks me what kind of stuff, and I tell her me and the boys got to go hunting. The village is running short on meat, and it's our shift. She gives me a look like she knows I'm full of it, which I am. I'm not old enough to hunt without the grown men.

"It won't take long, Wale," she says, pulling me by the wrist, "and trust me. You won't want to miss this." Fummi is messy as hell. She probably

wants me to see who Ade, the boy she likes, is making out with. Usually, I try to avoid all that girl stuff, but she's smart, has a sixth sense for adventure, and I trust her, even if she is an albino. I don't care about her skin. She's my sister, even though she's a pain. Besides, there might be something fun going on by the water. I grab my homeboys, Tunde and Niyi, and we get going.

My tribe has lived in this basin longer than time. When we wander down to the river, through the long woods, singing our favorite songs, as the pied crows squawk *ar-ar-ar*, as the cool air courses over my Ori, across my head, and tree leaves brush my shoulders to tell me hello, friend, I feel powerful. Near the river, where the land turns muddy under my toes, I feel like my feet are touching the feet of my forefathers, all the great chieftains of lore, the real OGs. Sometimes I wonder how I'll measure up to them when it's my turn, but Pops says don't sweat it because every future chief wonders the same thing. It's a sign that you're the right brother for the job.

We follow Tunde. He can't see that good, but has the nose and ears of a panther. He can smell water and knows all the best shortcuts. Fummi holds his hand to keep him from stepping on anything gross.

"Get down," Fummi says. We crouch behind some bushes. Pops is down by the water with my older brother Daré, the village lawgiver, and a couple of other guys, the old men of my boys. They're meeting with some cats I don't recognize and a few Oyinbo, white men.

"*Ebi npa mi*," Niyi says.

"You can't be hungry already," I say. "We just got here, you pig." Niyi is the baby of the group, but bigger than all of us. The kid never stops eating. Plus, he talks extra proper because his mama's a teacher.

"Do you see Oyinbo?" Fummi wiggles her eyebrows and smiles. I laugh. I always laugh when she does that. I can't help myself. "I told you so," she says.

"Fummi right again," Tunde says.

"Fummi right again." I say. "Yeah. Yeah." Fummi got a crush on Ade, but Tunde got a crush on Fummi. He agrees with everything she says with his coconut-head self. Of course, Fummi is right again. I don't know how she does it. It's like she has a third eye for tracking drama.

Sometimes people make fun of Fummi because she looks like Oyinbo, at least in the skin. I used to make fun, too, till I realized how bad it made her feel. Now, no one makes fun of her. They know better. I made sure of that. But I still have to watch out when those crazy witches stop by

the village. They think albino people parts are strong gris gris for magic. Could be, but ain't nobody cutting off my sister's fingers and toes so that someone can get a bladder of love potion. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Pops looks pissed. The cats from the other tribe look pissed. Oyinbo look pissed. Maybe they're having a hard time because of the language barrier, but that ain't usually such a big deal. Money talks everybody's language.

There's something really familiar about the cats from the other tribe, especially the fat guy, the one with all the bling. He's swimming in necklaces, and his headdress is huge. I ask Fummi. She says they're M'yongo. Mama taught her how to spot them. Look at the blood-colored band around the fat one's ankle. Look at the markings on that one's face. Damn, she has a good eye.

"The fat one is their Oloye," Fummi whispers.

"And the other one must be his spirit adviser," Tunde says.

"How do you know that?" I ask. "There's no way you can see him."

"I hear his prayer beads clacking together," Tunde says. "They don't sound like my mom's." Fummi pinches Tunde's cheek, and they both chuckle. Tunde is so annoying, always trying to impress Fummi. I also don't like that he's way taller than me, even though I'm a few seasons older than him and future Oloye of Nogomo.

"*Orungbe ngbe mi,*" Niyi says. Fummi gives him a bladder of water to drink.

"Wait, so you mean that's Big Chief M'yongo?" I ask too loudly. Fummi covers my mouth and shushes me. And I'm thinking something heavy is going down any time Pops is meeting outside the village walls with almost no protection. We all know the stories. Big Chief M'yongo is a worshipper of the fire spirit. He's a maniac. I get a chill down my back. Now, I really just want to go home.

Everyone by the river looks toward the bushes where we are. We drop to our bellies. The earth feels good and warm around my navel. A million-legged bug crawls by, heading home to his people. When we sit up, the men are back to their conversation. Big Chief M'yongo hands Daré something shiny. Daré gives it to Pops. Pops tumbles it in his hands and gives it back to Daré who gives it back to Big Chief M'yongo. Right on. Don't take nothing from that clown.

Big Chief M'yongo pushes Pops. That's a big no-no. You don't shove a great warrior chief like Pops. It just ain't smart. A scuffle breaks out. It

looks like shit about to get real, and it does. Another M'yongo slashes at Pops with a knife, but Daré kicks him down and stabs him in the heart with his long Ida blade. Blood leaks onto the soil. One Oyinbo points a funny-looking, short spear at Pops.

"What is that thing?" I ask.

"*Oluwa o*," Niyi says.

Fummi says it's a gun. I've heard about those, but never seen one. I know that they can steal someone's life force just like that, but Big Chief M'yongo waves his hand, and Oyinbo lowers his gun. All the M'yongo, except the dead one, and all the Oyinbo run for their flatboat and head upriver. Pops let them go. If he wanted them all dead, they would all be dead. He sharpens his blade every morning. We run down to the riverside.

"What are you kids doing here?" he asks. I'm thinking, damn, Pops. I ain't a little boy. My initiation ceremony is, like, next week, but I don't say nothing because Pops will click out on you if you catch him at the wrong moment, especially since Ogun took Mama to join our ancestors.

"We just came to make sure you were okay," Fummi says, and thank the gods for that. She's his princess, literally. Pops never says a mean thing to her. "What was that about?"

"They wanted to buy some of us," Pops says.

"What the hell?" I ask.

"Watch your trap, son," Pops says. Pops says they don't want to buy anyone from the royal family, but commoners like the hut builders or the girls who make lappa skirts. It's all part of a scheme the M'yongo have to get guns from Oyinbo. My head is spinning because I know all about slaving. Who doesn't? That's how war works. You fight some dudes. You beat some dudes. You make them your bitches. But buying people just for the hell of it? What's the world coming to? Niyi's old man is a builder. Does that mean they could buy him? Could they buy Niyi, too, like a two for one sale? Fummi doesn't seem surprised though, and I keep my mouth shut, so as not to look green.

"Those grassland nomads," Daré flicks a bug off his arm, "are all gone. Oyinbo will take them away."

"Away where?" I ask. Pops and Daré glance at each other. They don't look happy.

"M'yongo don't take no for answer," Pops says. "It probably means war."

"Why not just sell some people we don't like?" I ask. "Like Jeta. No-body likes that weirdo. He eats his own dookie, for crying out loud."

Daré whacks me upside the head. Tunde and Niyi are probably too

scared to laugh, but I know they won't let me live this one down. When my vision clears, Pops gives me a look that sucks the air out of my chest. He places a hand on my shoulder and frowns.

"Our people have never done that," he says, "and we're not about to start." Pops orders me to take care of the dead M'yongo's body, and he leaves with the other men and Fummi.

We Nogomo take death seriously. The teaching is that each person carries with him all the knowledge of his forefathers. When someone dies, that knowledge is lost to all of us for all time. The least we can do is return them to the soil. It takes a while for me, Tunde, and Niyi to drag the body up to drier land, but we make it. We bury him so that the animals won't feast on his flesh. Tunde says a prayer over the grave since he's the son of a priestess. We're tired. We're dirty. Still, none of us complain about any of it because it's an honor to do what we've done.

Later that night, the village tripping. Usually, we build a nice fire around the grand fire pit, eat and dance, but none of that tonight. The old women praying. Girls crying. The night birds are losing their ever-loving minds in the dark treetops. Pops and Daré lead the other men in a chant by Pops's hut. It's heavy shit, a war chant, means a lot of people about to die. It's not our first time at war. We Nogomo are a fighting tribe. It's our way, so we're always mixing up with somebody, but I realize that it was war what killed Mama. That was a while back. How am I just understanding this now?

Fummi and me sit on the ground near the village entrance. It's late, but the soil is still warm to my skin. The moon is very large and broken up by the tree leaves. Fummi breaks off a piece of leftover *akara*. It should taste sweet, but it's so bitter.

"I wish I could do something," I say. "I'm the prince."

"You are second prince," Fummi says. "There's nothing you can do." She's right, of course. Daré is next-in-line Oloye. I'm only Oloye after Pops and Daré. Fummi never fails to remind me of this fact. She's also right that I can't stop what's coming. Once the clouds gather, it must rain, grandpapa used to say.

"That's it," I say. Suddenly, the *akara* tastes sweet again.

"I HATE THIS PLAN," Tunde says. We're deep in the woods, many steps from home, on our way to M'yongo. Pops taught me these woods, showed me the world on my hand. Nogomo is at the tip of my thumb. The river runs along my wrist. M'yongo, the pinky to avoid.

“My mama going to be so mad when she finds out you took her river totem,” Tunde says.

“You let me take it,” I say.

“You bent my ear,” he says.

“That’s not the only thing I’ll bend if you snitch on me,” I say.

“Shut up, the pair of you,” Fummi says. “You cluck like chickens.”

“*Se molerin debe?*” Niyi asks.

“We’re almost there,” I say. “I can feel it.”

“Guys,” Tunde says. “Do you smell that?” I don’t smell anything, but that’s not surprising. He can smell a mouthful of seasoned yam from the other side of the village, but before long, we all smell it. It’s the worst stink I’ve ever sniffed. The smell comes from a big village we come up on. These villagers are so badass they don’t even have a wall to protect themselves. This is M’yongo.

We could have crouched and hidden behind a hut until we figured out where our target was, but I decide we should go in proud. No one will mess with us because we’re not grown folk. And it works. We walk right into the center of the village, and no one bugs us. They’re too busy getting ready for battle, circling their fire and yelling just like our old men back home. We wander for a long time. I’ve never seen a village as big as this one. Their normal huts are as big as Pops’s hut. Eventually, we find the smell.

We come to a clearing near where the village leaves its garbage. A whole bunch of people sit near the pile. Seems a strange thing to do, to sit near a stinky pile of garbage, but then I see that these people are tied together, some by rope and others by chains. The men’s hands are trapped behind their backs in an uncomfortable way. The women’s hands are bound in front of their bodies. Iron collars link everyone together. These are slaves.

Tunde holds his nose.

“Have a heart, child,” one of the women says. Her accent is thick, but I understand her. It helps that she has a kind face with bright teeth. Reminds me of Mama. “You would carry stench too if you were not allowed to bathe for a week. Your people are evil for what you’ve done to us.”

“Not my people, miss,” I say. “We ain’t M’yongo.”

“Well, what are you?” a man says. The side of his head bleeds.

“Nogomo,” Fummi says.

Some of the people close to us gasp and perk up.

“So your tribe has come to save us?” the first woman says.

Me and Niyi look at each other, guiltily.

“Not exactly,” I say. I tell them of our plan. We brought a river totem from our village. We’ll place it in the M’yongo spirit hut and burn the totem. This will call down bad fortune on the M’yongo, so that anything they try tomorrow will fail. When he was my age, my brother Daré did the same thing. We wiped out the other side in that war.

“That’s a good strategy,” another man says. One of his eyes is swollen shut. “But it don’t help us none.”

“Foolish children,” the first woman says. “You should not have come here. If you are captured, you will suffer our fate.” The woman tells us that huge boats wait at the farthest shore. If you’re unlucky enough to be on one of those boats, you’ll never see home again.

I notice that some of the slaves aren’t grown folk. Some are as young as Niyi. Some are as small as me. I have a sinking feeling.

A couple of guys with spears come around the corner.

“The guards,” the woman says. “Quick. Laugh and then spit on us.”

“What?” I say. “I ain’t doing that, miss.”

“You must pull your head from the lion’s mouth slowly,” she says. “Do as I say if you want to live.” She kicks my shin. We spit on the slaves and laugh our heads off. The guards laugh with us and spit, too. The woman doesn’t wipe her face. As dark as it is, the guards must think we’re just local kids having a good time. Me and the others just sort of slink away in the confusion. Before the slaves are out of sight, I look back at the woman. She waves at me. A guard bashes her in the back with his weapon.

“We should leave,” Fummi says.

“Yeah,” Tunde says. “This was a really bad idea.”

“*Léhin òkùkù biribiri ìmólé á tàn,*” Niyi says.

“Niyi’s right,” I say. “We came too far to go home without finishing the job. We’re Nogomo. It’s our duty. We’re the good guys.”

The spirit hut is guarded, but there’s a hatch, like a doggy entrance, on the back side. Tunde pulls the river totem out of his pouch. I tell him to go inside and handle his business. After all, he is the priestess’s son.

“Man,” he says. “I ain’t going in there.”

Niyi puts his hands up. “*S’onsiere ni?*”

“I’ll do it,” Fummi says. Tunde grabs Fummi’s arm. He won’t let her go. I wouldn’t have let her do it either. Niyi says that I would fit through the hatch easiest.

“Fine.” I snatch the totem and kindling from Tunde. “If I wake up dead tomorrow,” I say, jabbing Tunde in the chest, “you’re the first kid I’m coming back to haunt.” Fummi rolls her eyes.

I get into the hut with no problem. Light the fire with no problem. Burn the totem and say my prayer. I call on Oya to bring a storm of pain to this village. It goes fast. The totem becomes ashes. I say a wrap-up prayer and head for the hatch. When I crawl back out, the others are gone.

I find them not very far away being led by a group of M'yongo. These guys aren't guards. They're full-on warriors like Pops and Daré. Some of the warriors actually have guns. I've never seen Tunde and Niya look so sad. The biggest warrior pulls Fummi by a chain attached to the iron collar around her neck. She squats like she's trying to break free, but the biggest warrior yanks her close.

"You want this one for yourself?" the biggest warrior says.

"Heck, no," a warrior in a tall headdress says. "She ain't ripe enough for me. But I tell you what we can do. That's easy money, that one. We hack her up and make a killing."

"Hnh. I didn't think about that." The biggest warrior rubs his chin. "I'm in, but don't tell the boss."

Fummi screams. The big guy punches her in the face twice.

"How much do teeth go for?" he asks.

Pops used to tell me stories about Nogomo warrior chiefs who get possessed by the spirits of our forefathers and fight off whole tribes of demons, single-handedly. I don't know if my forefathers are with me, but I lose it and crash into the crowd of M'yongo. I only have my knife, which isn't even half the size of what these guys are packing, but Pops always said that when up against a larger opponent, strike fast. I quickly stab a few of the warriors. I know that most of my hits are too shallow to do much damage, but I get one of them deep in the gut. Something hits me, but I don't feel it. I feel nothing. I'll save my friends, and I'll save Fummi, too.

The one I stabbed in the gut falls to his knees, and, in the commotion, a bunch of us end up in a pile. Fummi's face is right next to mine. Her lips bleed, and she's saying something I can't make out.

"What is it, sis?" I ask.

It's only a whisper—something she's saying over and over. *Promise me. Promise me. Promise me.*

"Anything you want," I say. Her face is covered in water.

"Promise me that you will live. Promise me that you will remain free."

I nod.

"Then run." She pushes me away. "Go." The warriors climb to their feet. I want to go at them again, but I feel weak. Except for the one I got



good, they hardly seem hurt at all. The big guy throws his blade at me, but it spins over my head.

I run.

NIGHT YAWNS INTO DAY. And again. I know these woods like my own fingers, but I'm dizzy, and I'm lost. I eat what I find, and fall asleep. I drink water from leaves. I sharpen my blade. The back of my head pounds and bleeds, although the bleeding isn't as bad as it was. When I reach around to my back, there's a hole that I can stick my finger in. It stings bad, but I'll live. Finally, I find Nogomo. Something ain't right.

Most of the huts are gone, burned down, and it doesn't take a spirit caller to know that no one has lived here for days. The body of a woman lies across the grand fire pit. She's not burned, but it looks like vultures ate her after she died. Her thigh bone pokes through her skin. This is Tunde's mama. I don't look for anyone else.

I make my way down to the edge of the woods near the river, but no one is there. I've never felt so alone. Even the mud under my feet feels empty. I follow the river to the farthest shore, where the water goes on forever. Pops used to bring us here all the time, but things have changed. A big hut, biggest I've ever seen, sits near the water. Warriors lead people out of the hut. My people. I don't have to be close to know that they're strung together by ropes and iron collars.

Down in the water is this thing that I can't wrap my Ori around. It's like a giant hut, but flipped upside down, with bare trees sticking out of it. The whole thing floats. I guess it's a boat, but bigger than any boat I've ever seen. Pops could be down there. Daré, too. Or they've already joined Mama and our ancestors.

I wish Fummi was here with me. I have so many questions for her, but I don't need to ask her who I am. I pull my knife from my waistband, and sunlight flashes across the edge of my blade.