

# THE BOY TO BEAT THE GODS

“Thrilling, tautly-written, pulls you right in and keeps you there! Plus: bonus trickster god!”

**Louie Stowell, author of *Loki***

“An electrifying adventure that will leave you breathless. Thorpe has written a cracker of a story!”

**Tolá Okogwu, author of  
*Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun***

“A spectacular debut! ...a heart-pounding, heart-lifting adventure.”

**Sophie Anderson, author of  
*The House With Chicken Legs***

“An amazing, fast-paced adventure filled with action...had me at the edge of my seat.”


**Alex Falase-Koya, co-writer of  
*The Breakfast Club Adventures***

“Tremendous, nail-biting action filled with brilliant characters you can’t help but root for; this is children’s fiction at its finest.

Thorpe is a talent to watch!”  
**Lizzie Huxley-Jones, author of  
*Vivi Conway and the Sword of Legend***

“A thrilling and magical adventure that stands out from the crowd... Spectacular.”

**Jasmine Richards, author of *The Unmorrow Curse***



*For the dreamers.*

First published in the UK in 2024 by Usborne Publishing Limited, Usborne House,  
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. [usborne.com](http://usborne.com)

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited, Prüfeninger Str. 20,  
93049 Regensburg, Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

Text copyright © Ashley Thorpe, 2024

The right of Ashley Thorpe to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted  
by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Cover illustration by Loyiso Mkize © Usborne Publishing, 2024

Icon illustrations by Freya Harrison © Usborne Publishing, 2024

The name Usborne and the Balloon logo are trade marks of Usborne Publishing Limited.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without  
the prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products  
of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance  
to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781805075639 9584/1 JFMAM JASOND/24

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.



# THE BOY TO BEAT THE GODS

## ASHLEY THORPE



# CONTENTS

The Seven Orishas	6	17. Troubled Water	138
1. The Great Baobab Tree	9	18. The Water God	144
2. A Father's Love	17	19. Broken Alliance	156
3. The Mysterious Traveller	27	20. The Hunter God	162
4. The Orishas Arrive	36	21. Fight or Flight	170
5. A Waking Nightmare	44	22. A Brief Respite	178
6. Shadow of the Orishas	48	23. A Way Forward	190
7. A Gift from a God	57	24. The War God	198
8. First Step	61	25. The Thunder God	210
9. Departure	66	26. The Last Stand	221
10. The Trickster God	72	27. The Mother of Gods	226
11. Where Pathways Meet	82	28. Pride Before the Fall	235
12. A Reluctant Alliance	92	29. Endings	241
13. The World's Greatest Fisherman	100	30. The God of Life and Death	247
14. Bargaining Power	108	31. Beginnings	254
15. The Sky God	119	Epilogue	261
16. United by Pain	128	Author's Note	265
		Acknowledgements	269

# THE SEVEN



**EKO**  
the Trickster God



**OBATUNDE**  
the Sky Father



**ONYX**  
the God of War



**SANJOH**  
the God of Thunder



**SIA**  
Goddess of Water



**ONI**  
the Hunter God



**MAYA**  
the Mother of Orishas

# ORISHAS

## Chapter One



# THE GREAT BAOBAB TREE

At the farthest end of the village, before the Sia River that split the land, a lone baobab tree stood. The tree was older than any village and as tall as any clouds. Its fruit never fell from the branches and was said to have nourished the fearsome Orishas in their infancy.

Kayode's focus was the ripe brown fruit on these far-off branches, rather than the mischievous goats he was meant to be tending. The village elders had made it abundantly clear that the fruit was forbidden and belonged to the Orishas alone. In fact, they'd tried to drum it into him every time he was caught climbing the great tree. But Kayode's dream of eating a fruit and becoming godlike himself had never faded.

Apart from five other young goatherds, there was hardly a soul in the plains surrounding the baobab tree. The sun

had scorched the earth, and the wilting grass thirstily awaited the next rains. This meant that there was no long grass for a disobedient boy to hide in. It was lucky for Kayode, then, that the tree's guardian Elder Moyo was sound asleep in its shade. Kayode stared at the hefty rain-stick in the crook of the elder's arm and felt a bead of sweat roll down his neck. His bottom was still sore from the last time he'd attempted the climb but met Moyo's wrath instead. Nonetheless, he pointed the hand that wasn't shaking up towards the treetop.

"Sisters and brothers, what day is today?" Kayode asked of anyone who would listen.

"Today is time you kept a close watch over your herd on the ground, instead of on those branches in the sky," called Akufo, a herder who was much closer to being a man than he was. "Unless you're just that eager to feel the rain-stick whack your backside again."

"If Elder Moyo ever wakes up!" Another of the goatherds laughed. "Perhaps it is your lucky day after all, baby Kayode."

Kayode would have scowled at being called a baby, had he not mistakenly taken the words as encouragement.

"Today is the day that I taste the fruit of the gods!" he said determinedly.

Ignoring the laughter and headshaking that followed,

Kayode puffed his chest out like a dwarf frog. He turned to his younger sister Temitope, who he'd bribed with a sizeable portion of sweet, crunchy kokoro on condition that she helped him out in the plains. She stared up at him with hope as much as admiration. Kayode hugged her and removed the horn that hung from his waistband.

"You're my eyes and ears, Temi. Blow this horn if Elder Moyo stirs, so that I have enough warning. When I reach the high branches, you'll be the first to share the fruit of the gods with me."

"Do you promise?" said Temi.

"Of course." Kayode grinned. "And a promise between brother and sister is stronger than the sun."

Temi scratched at her shaven head. "But what about when you tried to climb yesterday, and two nights before?"

"Never mind about that," muttered Kayode. "There's no greater reward than achieving that which seems impossible. It's as the elders say, '*Sometimes we have to fail in order to learn*'."

"The only thing you'll learn is how to take a beating!" Akufo called, prompting more laughter. Kayode kissed his teeth in return.

Brother and sister tiptoed together through the scorched grass. Temitope's bare feet caught a particularly sharp branch and she yelped. Kayode turned to her, wide-eyed,

placing a finger to his lips. He quickly glanced back to the tree, but Elder Moyo was out cold, gurgling away as though her throat was full of palm wine. Judging by the empty jugs beside her, it probably had been some minutes earlier.

“Stay here, stay down and watch carefully,” Kayode whispered to Temi. Then he trotted into the clearing of the tree and dived for the thick trunk. He pawed his way quickly upward, fingernails and rough feet digging into the soft bark of the tree.

Kayode was sweating doubly when he realized he was higher than he'd ever been before. It was surely his day to seize the fruit. No one in his village, Ikire, would ridicule him after this! He'd be more revered than any elder and stronger than any warrior in the village.

Down below, the goatherds called out to one another as they watched excitedly. But just as the fruit-bearing branches were nearly within reach, the sound of Temitope's horn drowned out that of the other four boys and girls.

Kayode looked down in alarm to see a furious Elder Moyo scrambling up towards him.

“Ka-yohh-deeee!” Her shrill voice was every bit a match for the din of the horn.

Kayode resumed his forbidden climb, with Moyo's shrieking and the thought of the big rain-stick giving him an additional boost. But as fast as he climbed, he could hear

the rattle of the gourd on the rain-stick getting louder and louder still. He grabbed for a thick branch and hauled himself up. The oval-shaped fruit was right there for the taking. He peered down and saw Elder Moyo grab for the branch with her empty hand. How could a woman as old as her be so nimble? Kayode shuffled along the branch towards the fruit and the yells of the herders grew feverish. This was it! His fingers stretched out for the hanging fruit...

Then, the rain-stick hit its target with a *thwack*. Kayode yelped, letting go of the branch, and the world turned upside down and fell away. The clouds and tree branches were suddenly below his feet, and earth became sky. He landed on his back with a thud, groaning with pain and disappointment in equal measure. He gingerly lifted his head, hearing quick footsteps, and his eyes met Temitope's. Relieved to find him okay, she patted his shoulder comfortingly.

“It's okay, Kayode. You tried your best, and that's what matters.”

Another thud made the ground tremble, as ancient Elder Moyo somehow made a perfect dismount and landing from the great tree. Kayode tried to sit up. Elder Moyo stood over him.

“Are you all right, boy?” she asked. If she was truly concerned her hardened face barely showed it.

“Y-yes, Elder Moyo,” Kayode stammered. A swift knock to his head followed, and then the rain-stick was back in the crook of Moyo’s arm before he could blink. The goatherds had lost interest now and, having been sufficiently entertained, walked back to see to their duties.

“The mark of a fool is to repeat his mistakes.” Elder Moyo frowned. “Why do you choose to repeatedly disobey the laws of the land? Is it worth such punishment?”

Kayode got to his feet with his head hung low. “Being stuck out here as a lowly herder is punishment enough,” he muttered. “Everyone listens to what you have to say. You wouldn’t understand.” Temitope grabbed his hand, as she coyly hid behind him. Kayode wistfully glanced back up to the fruit on the high branches.

Elder Moyo sighed. “You think by eating the fruit of the gods you can become an Orisha and do as you please?” she said with a raised eyebrow. “You wouldn’t be the first to try. And do you know what happened to those who did, many, many years ago?”

Kayode swallowed a lump in his throat. “Some of them died from eating it,” he said.

“That’s right. And the ones who didn’t soon faced the wrath of the Orishas for their defiance. The fruit of the gods is just that – not for mankind.”

Kayode fell silent, staring at his bare feet. Fear of the

Orishas was passed down through generations like a family heirloom. He was only five the last time the Orishas came to Ikire. *He* didn’t remember it clearly, but the village did. You were lucky to find a family that hadn’t lost a loved one as a sacrifice, or who’d been killed for sport by the deadly gods. The Orishas left behind an open wound that would never heal.

Elder Moyo sat back down under the tree, closed her eyes and cleared her throat, as she always did when she was about to begin a cautionary lecture. “Do you remember the great powers the seven Orishas wield?”

“Sanjoh – the wrath of the heavens who controls thunder and lightning,” Kayode began. “Eko – the shapeshifting trickster god. Onyx – the war god and master craftsman. Sia – who controls the water of the great rivers, including our river which bears her name. Oni – the human hunter who takes skulls as trophies. Obatunde – the greedy sky god tasked with creating humans on Earth. Maya – the mother of all Orishas.”

Elder Moyo stared at the boy intently. “I would not want to face the fury of even one of them by choice.” She waved a hand at his herd of goats. “Don’t you wonder why the other animals have migrated from the plains early?” she asked.

Kayode’s brow furrowed. He hadn’t even noticed.

“The animals sense it before we do. It could be five years or ten years that have passed, but however long it takes, the Orishas always return,” said Moyo. “They are coming again, Kayode – for the fruit of the great baobab tree and for the souls of our people. It’s our job to ensure we make whatever sacrifices we can to appease them, and to keep as many of us safe as possible. We can’t do that if you go around taking what is theirs.”

Kayode’s heart hammered. When even an elder’s eyes were wide with fear, he knew that he should be afraid. And yet anger swelled in his chest.

“Why do they get to go to whichever village they please and take whatever they want?” said Kayode indignantly. “Why do we just let it happen?”

“Your job is to herd livestock, my child, not to question your elders. Who knows whether these goats will need to feed us or feed the Orishas. Do you understand?”

Kayode held tighter to his shaking sister. Seeing that she was scared, he forced himself to calm down. “Yes. I’m sorry, Elder,” he said.

Under the shade of the tree, Elder Moyo exhaled deeply as she reached for another jug of palm wine. “Don’t be sorry, child,” she said. “Be ready.”

## Chapter Two



### A FATHER’S LOVE

Some hours later, as the sun lowered in the sky, new herders came to take the places of the others. Kayode’s mind had wandered the whole day long, and it took a moment before he realized that his stint was over.

A broad man with eyebrows as fat as slugs and armed with an ornate staff was approaching the baobab tree. It was Elder Joba. He poked at the dozing Elder Moyo with the handle end of his staff. Moyo’s eyes snapped open with a clarity belying her weariness just moments earlier. It was time for a new elder to protect the tree. As Moyo rose, Kayode saw her gesticulating wildly while Elder Joba’s brow furrowed. He turned his head, swift as a shark, in the direction of the goatherds.

“Kayodeeee! Just wait until your iya finds out you climbed this tree again!” Joba called. “You won’t be able

to sit down for a week!”

With the speed at which gossip passed between tongues in the village, Kayode wouldn't have been surprised if his mother already knew. The other goatherds chuckled to themselves as they walked towards Ikire. Kayode ushered Temitope along, his face and neck hot from shame just as much as from a day's work in the sun. A solitary goat offered a high-pitched bleat, almost as if in sympathy.

“I think you are the bravest boy in the world,” whispered Temitope. Kayode blinked a few times in quick succession. He was not feeling so brave now. Especially not after what Elder Moyo had told them about the Orishas returning soon. If only he could become an Orisha too, then he'd show the whole village his strength, never mind the other herders.

Kayode and Temitope were soon back in Ikire with its colourful compounds of earth and timber. Smoke billowed above the thatched roofs from the inner courtyards of the small buildings. The fragrant clouds of steam from pots of delicious herbs, pulses and red-red stews made Kayode's mouth water. But something wasn't right.

The village was usually quiet at this time of the day. Trade in the village centre ceased by early evening and merchants left or retired for the day. But today, the pace

was frenetic. Several elders, with their emerald-green fila hats and kaftans, were present and talking among themselves as much as to the anxious villagers. Kayode felt a chill. He was certain he knew the reason – all seven reasons, in fact – for this tense atmosphere.

*The Orishas!* he thought.

The hypnotic tones of a kora harp soundtracked the busy scene. Sitting cross-legged outside a compound, the village griot played as though possessed. A light sweat beaded on his forehead below his fila. Kayode usually loved to sit and listen to his stories, but even the griot's melodies were full of foreboding today. His fingers danced along the instrument's neck and body as though it were an extension of himself. He occasionally let out a grunt to punctuate the music – a story fighting to make its way out of his throat and into the world.

“At the beginning of all things,” the griot began, “there was Olutobi, the supreme spirit. Olutobi the Almighty ruled the endless heavens and created the vast universe. Among those creations was Earth.

“Yet Olutobi was never concerned with the affairs of Earth, instead leaving it to their sons and daughters – those we know as the Orishas. Obatunde the sky god, was tasked with shaping the mountains, flowing the sea and breathing life into the human beings he had created.

“The Orishas were to grow in numbers to guide

humankind through life's twists and turns, helping us to learn and progress. But as millennia passed the Orishas lost their way. They have forgotten all they had promised to do here on Earth, choosing instead to feed on the souls of the very beings they created..."

"Come on," Kayode said, turning Temitope away towards their home. The diversion was as much for his own peace of mind as it was to protect his sister. He didn't want to hear anything more about becoming Orisha food – and certainly not to a musical accompaniment.

Kayode hadn't gone more than two steps when he walked headfirst into someone. He let out a grunt, jumping back in surprise, and the figure, cloaked in red, tottered back too. Kayode barely caught sight of their face under a drooping hood.

"E-excuse me!" he said. But the covered figure scurried away without a word. Kayode may not have seen the face of the person underneath the red cloak, but their smell was sweet. It was like no flower or herb he had smelled in the village before. As he watched the figure hurry away, he saw the flash of a golden anklet on their left leg. Their skin was deep umber. He wondered if they were a wealthy merchant. How else were they able to afford gold? But he put the stranger out of mind and continued on his way. There were far more pressing things to worry about.



Once Kayode became a man he would be able to go and build his own small compound. But until then, he lived under the same roof as Temi and his mother. At home, just as in the plains, there was no place to hide. Kayode had barely lifted the fabric of the compound door and placed his feet on the stone floor when his mother appeared, glaring at her son.

"It's not what you've heard, Iya!" Kayode began.

"This child of mine! How do you know what I've heard?" his mother said, shaking her head.

Kayode swallowed, his throat desert dry. Temitope, sensing the coming storm, made her way quietly to the courtyard.

"How many times do you need to be told, Kayode?" his mother scolded. "You of all people should know not to meddle in the affairs of the Orishas."

Kayode's face scrunched up resentfully, but he held his tongue. The only time his mother even alluded to his father was when Kayode was being told off. He liked to believe that his father fought bravely before the Orishas took him. It gave him reason to try and be strong now, in the face of the coming danger.

His mother's face softened and she sighed. She shook her head lightly again as if ridding herself of her anger.

“Help your iya to make dinner, eh?” she said, motioning to yams and cooking pots with her lips rather than pointing with her fingers. “You must be hungry.”

Hearing that the raised voices had settled down, Temitope eventually joined Kayode and their mother, and together they pounded yams and made iyan and egusi soup. For a while, the Orishas were forgotten. There was comfort for each of them in their routine.

As they sat eating their meal, Kayode caught his mother watching him. He instinctively dabbed round his mouth, fearing he had been eating sloppily (again). But he watched a gentle light flood from his mother’s face as she regarded both her children. Kayode smiled too. Their mother was hard, but also protective and generous. It had been the three of them for almost as long as he could remember, and there was no mistaking the feeling: they were loved.

Without warning, the fear crept into Kayode’s heart again. Lurking in the corner of his mind was the understanding that life could be snatched away – just like their father was – tearing their little family apart.

“Elder Moyo said that the Orishas are coming again,” Kayode said, his eyes flicking from his bare feet to search his mother’s gaze. She stayed quiet, but Kayode saw the same look in her eyes that he’d seen in Elder Moyo’s. “She said that we have to be ready,” he continued when no

reply came. “Are we being punished?”

“Temi, go and feed the chickens,” said his mother.

“But I want to hear about the gods!” said Temi.

“And I want to be queen of Yorubaland. But as I’m not married to an Oba, and there happens to be a sack of corn feed behind you, it seems we both can’t have what we want.”

Temi huffed and rose from the ground, dragging the sack of feed behind her. Kayode and his mother were alone.

“What else did Elder Moyo tell you?” she asked.

“She said that we may need to make sacrifices. Elder Moyo... I’ve never seen an elder afraid before.”

“She has seen the gods come seven times in her lifetime, Kayode,” said his mother. “You were only five the last time. That is why you do not know fear as she does.”

Kayode frowned. It was akin to being called a baby. All the time adults declared, in one way or another, that he knew nothing. He wanted to know everything, but the adults in Ikire never really talked about the Orishas if they could help it. Well, it was time he found out the truth. “Every day we give thanks to Olutobi – creator of the same Orishas who harm us. So why do they come for us?”

“Only the gods know the ways of the gods,” was all his mother said. “We work hard to be a village worthy of Olutobi the Almighty.”

“Not even the elders know?” asked Kayode. “We just have to accept this? That we could all be sacrifices? That everything we work for could be taken away?”

“Kayode, we are mortals. Not even the Oba of Yorubaland himself, with all the land he rules, can understand the Orishas. We accept life’s blessing and so we *must* accept its hardships.”

Her words might have been more frustrating than Kayode had hoped, but at least she was trying to answer his questions. He had never spoken with his mother like this before. That in itself felt so strange to him.

“Yes, the signs are that the Orishas are not far from our land, Kayode,” his mother said, resigned. She cast a hand over his. “This is why family, and the time we share together, matters. Because the Orishas remind us that everything is finite.”

“Please tell me more about Baba. What happened that day?” said Kayode. His mother had always avoided talking about how his father was chosen. But everything felt different today.

“Every time the Orishas come, and in every place they go on the continent, they take the fruit of the gods to sustain themselves,” Kayode’s mother said. “And they take living sacrifices.”

“I know this,” Kayode said, desperate to understand the

unspoken truth. “Baba was made a sacrifice. But why did the gods choose him?”

Kayode’s mother looked at her son with glassy eyes and clutched his hands tighter. “Your baba was never meant to be a sacrifice. The Orishas seem to prefer to take the lives of the young. Your baba gave himself because they wanted to take his only son.”

Kayode’s head swam. He felt faint. His mother’s hands cupped his face, and she pressed her forehead to his own.

“Your baba’s love saved you that day, Kayode. Even though our lives are small, love is great. That can never be taken away.”

That evening, long after the flames of the fire had burned out, Kayode lay wide awake on his straw bed. He listened to his sister’s deep breaths as she slept. He turned his head and looked at where his mother lay. Her chest rose and fell, but there wasn’t a sound. He knew that fear kept her awake too.

Kayode only realized that he was beginning to drift off to sleep when raised voices startled him awake again. He listened as the voices grew louder, and soon he could hear the sounds of other villagers stirring and murmuring in their compounds. Kayode got up, his heart still pounding.

He walked across the stone floor to the compound door. Was this it? Had the Orishas come?

“Kayode!” his mother called in a hushed voice. Her eyes gave the warning that her muted voice could not. The raised voices were close now, and Kayode couldn’t shy away. He had to know.

He pulled back the woven fabric of the entrance and stepped out, letting his eyes adjust. There were warriors, in their black and gold, calling out to villagers to return to their compounds. In the midst of it all were two other stolid warriors. In their grip was a young woman who thrashed and yelled to be let go. Under the cool moonlight, Kayode caught the briefest glimpse of her face and, as her legs kicked out at the warriors, the flash of a golden anklet.

## Chapter Three



# THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELLER

“Get back in your homes!” a warrior ordered, passing Kayode by, her wrist guards clinking as she marched onwards.

Kayode retreated momentarily behind the fabric before peering back out again.

“What’s happening?” his mother asked.

“Someone’s been captured,” Kayode said. “A girl. It sounds like she’s from a far-off village, going by her accent.”

“What?” said his mother, sitting up sharply. “A rival clan? Heavens alive, why now of all times?”

Kayode also wondered about this. If Ikire was at risk of an attack from another clan, that explained why they were being told to stay in their compounds. But fantasies of the great baobab tree returned, too, and an idea quickly took root. If they were brave enough to risk it all for the fruit,

couldn't the village easily be protected, not just from a rival clan but from the Orishas as well? With this disturbance, and under cover of darkness, maybe he could try to climb the tree again?

The warriors and their captive continued towards the heart of the village. Kayode heard more sharp voices coming towards him, and he dipped back behind the fabric. Joba thundered past leading five other elders, including Moyo, after the warriors.

"We spotted her hiding out in the plains, waiting for a chance to steal the fruit," said Joba hurriedly. "We need to question her and set up a guard around the tree immediately."

Kayode peered out as the voices of the elders became distant, heart sinking as he realized his hopes of stealing from the tree had fallen apart even quicker than usual. But it sounded as though the mysterious girl, the same stranger he'd bumped into earlier, had the same goal as he did. Where had she come from, he wondered, and why had *she* come for the fruit?

"I'll be back soon, Iya." Kayode stepped back out into the night, ignoring his mother's calls. He followed the elders at a distance, skulking over the dry earth and, for a change, being grateful for his small size, which allowed him to dip behind compounds when he needed to.

Light from a fire illuminated a large compound, and the

elders slipped inside one after another. For a moment the only voice to be heard was that of the girl, yelling at her captors. Kayode didn't waste a second, quickly climbing the curved wall up to the thatched roof.

"You had better let me out of here, unharmed, unless you want to start a war," the girl threatened. "I'm telling you, this won't end well if you don't let me go!"

Kayode silently crawled over to the large opening in the roof, above the fire pit of the compound. He peered over as carefully as he could. There were four warriors guarding the girl. Torches were ablaze on the walls, illuminating their stoic faces. Kayode saw the red, unfamiliar cloth of the girl's cloak and her deep umber skin. Her fierce eyes flashed at the warriors, who remained silent as she continued to protest. Eventually, the woman who had ordered Kayode back into his compound earlier strode over to the girl and silenced her with a swift backhand. The girl's locs whipped around as she was struck, and she looked as shocked as Kayode felt. Then she glared back at the warrior, her contempt clear to all.

"She claims to be from Abigi in the south," one of the warriors revealed.

Elder Moyo moved forward, and the girl's eyes met hers. "The markings on her arms confirm that to be true," Moyo said.

“But Abigi has a great baobab too,” said another elder.  
“Why would she come here?”

“Well that is a question she can answer for us, wouldn’t you say?” said Moyo. “Why are you here, girl?”

“I demand my release,” the girl replied.

“You’re in no position to demand anything at all,” Joba said. “You’re lucky I didn’t kill you on the spot.”

“It took you and three others to even lay a finger on me.”  
The girl smirked, and Joba’s lofty expression disappeared.

“Tell us why you travelled from Abigi,” Elder Moyo asked more forcefully.

After a moment, the girl spoke again. “The great baobab in my land is barren.”

A collective gasp went around the compound.

“How can that be? The trees are sacred!”

“So you came to steal from us? How many of you are there?”

“I came to find fruit of the gods to save my people!” the girl cried. “Can any of you say you wouldn’t do the same?”

“Elders, she has just admitted to trying to steal the fruit of the gods. This cannot go unpunished!” cried a warrior.

Elder Moyo held up her hand to bring quiet to the compound. She studied the young girl’s face.

“You acted alone, didn’t you?” said Moyo. “Surely your

own village elders would have told you that such a plan was rash and foolish.”

The girl, taciturn, glared at Elder Moyo.

“The Orishas are coming and you have no fruit to offer them. I can understand your desperation,” said Moyo. “Even a thousand sacrifices wouldn’t quell Sanjoh’s rage.”

There was silence as all present imagined the wrath of the thunder god. Kayode’s heart sank for the girl, even though he didn’t know her. But if it was his village, his great baobab that hadn’t borne fruit, he didn’t know what he would have done. All humans were at the mercy of the Orishas, but Abigi’s chances of remaining unscathed were clearly even worse than Ikire’s.

“But your presence here... solves a problem of our own,” Elder Moyo continued. “We no longer need to decide among ourselves who to sacrifice.”

Kayode almost lost his grip on the roof, such was his shock. He had assumed that the gods decided who to take... but it was the elders? Kayode’s mind raced. The conversation with his mother played over in his head. That meant that the elders had, at one time, chosen him. He stifled a moan. This wasn’t fair. This wasn’t right.

“No!” the girl cried. “Let me go!”

“You came here of your own accord. Your fate was sealed,” said Elder Joba, a satisfied glint in his eyes.

“I am the daughter of the Oba and Olori. I am Princess Tiwa!” the girl shouted. “You will bring war to these lands if you make me your sacrifice, mark my words.”

Kayode stifled a gasp. A princess?

“My dear,” said Elder Moyo, “I am sorry to learn the fate of your people. But when the Orishas come to *your* village and discover the barren tree, there’ll be no one left to bring war to us. We’ll do what we must to avoid the same fate.”

The elders turned to exit as the princess cried and cursed at them. But then Tiwa’s cries warped and changed into cavernous laughter, stopping the elders in their tracks.

“How many warriors are guarding your tree now?” she said. The elders’ eyes widened and they looked to one another for answers.

“You think the elders of my village are not so desperate that they wouldn’t order our warriors to travel here? You think I was alone out there in the plains?” The princess laughed again, and the elders and warriors left the girl alone in the compound, racing out into the night.

Kayode stayed silent on the roof as more warriors were called, and a hunting party headed quickly in the direction of the Sia River and the great baobab. Kayode peered into the compound again as Tiwa slumped against the post. Her laughter had turned to sobs again and she jerked at the post trying to free herself. In frustration, she cried out to the sky

and her eyes met Kayode’s. He stopped, frozen, his own surprise mirrored by the girl’s.

Tiwa stayed still and silent for a moment before once more trying to break herself free. Kayode hesitated, then dropped down through the hole, picked himself up and took tentative steps towards her.

“I...I can’t let you leave,” Kayode stammered. The princess sucked at her teeth but didn’t reply. “Stop!”

“Boy, if you want to stop me then stop me!” Tiwa spat. “I’m not waiting for them to return and sacrifice me to the Orishas.”

Kayode wavered. She was only a couple of years older than him at most, so he was annoyed at being called “boy”. But even still, he didn’t want to sacrifice this girl any more than he did his own villagers. He had two choices: to restrain her or let her go. The princess watched him as she struggled.

“You aren’t made for this,” she said. “Look at you.”

“I am!” said Kayode. “I’m the only one who wants to stand up to the Orishas. I’m the only one who would risk it all rather than see another person dead!”

Tiwa stopped. “What are you talking about?”

“Eating the fruit of the gods!” Kayode blurted. “If just one of us was able to survive and gain the powers of an Orisha, we could fight back rather than let them take everything.”

Tiwa's brow furrowed. She bit her bottom lip thoughtfully. "And you would take that chance, would you?"

Kayode's gaze was unwavering. "I will taste the fruit of the gods and I will become powerful enough to stop them! But if your people are stealing the fruit then I can't do it. The chance is lost."

"There are no *people*," said the princess. "I came alone. And I can't be around when your elders and warriors figure that out."

Kayode stared at the girl open mouthed. She'd tricked them.

"Maybe eating the fruit is the only way now after all..." Tiwa said, eyes flickering with resolve. "It might kill me... or you. But the two of us together – this plan stands a better chance than hoping a few pieces of fruit will appease them enough to let my people live. If it works and we survive, then we can fight! I can save my people. You can save yours."

Kayode's heart soared. Looking into the girl's eyes, he saw the fierceness that was needed to take on the Orishas. Finally, there was someone as willing as he was to take a chance. But a part of him wavered.

"Help me break these ropes," Tiwa pleaded, shifting her body so that her hands were presented to Kayode.

She had tricked the elders...

"Please," Tiwa half-whispered in desperation.

She could fight, maybe hold off anyone who tried to stop them while he climbed the tree. Without her, surely there would never be another chance to take the fruit? The village would suffer whatever fate the gods had in store. Kayode made his decision – he got onto his knees and started to untie the ropes binding the princess.

That was when the first talking drum sounded.

Kayode stopped, and the princess turned sharply. "Was that—"

"The talking drums..." Kayode whimpered. The two of them stared as if frozen in time. Another drum sounded – the vibrations rolling through the air like thunder.

"Is that for me?" Tiwa began, with a shake in her voice. "Or...is that...?"

Kayode unbound the ropes as the panicked voices of villagers rose to a crescendo.

"The Orishas are coming. Now!" Kayode said in a rushed panic. "We have to get to the tree before they—"

Kayode didn't finish – a dull pain shot across the base of his skull. He found himself falling, barely feeling the stone floor as he hit it. Then everything went dark.