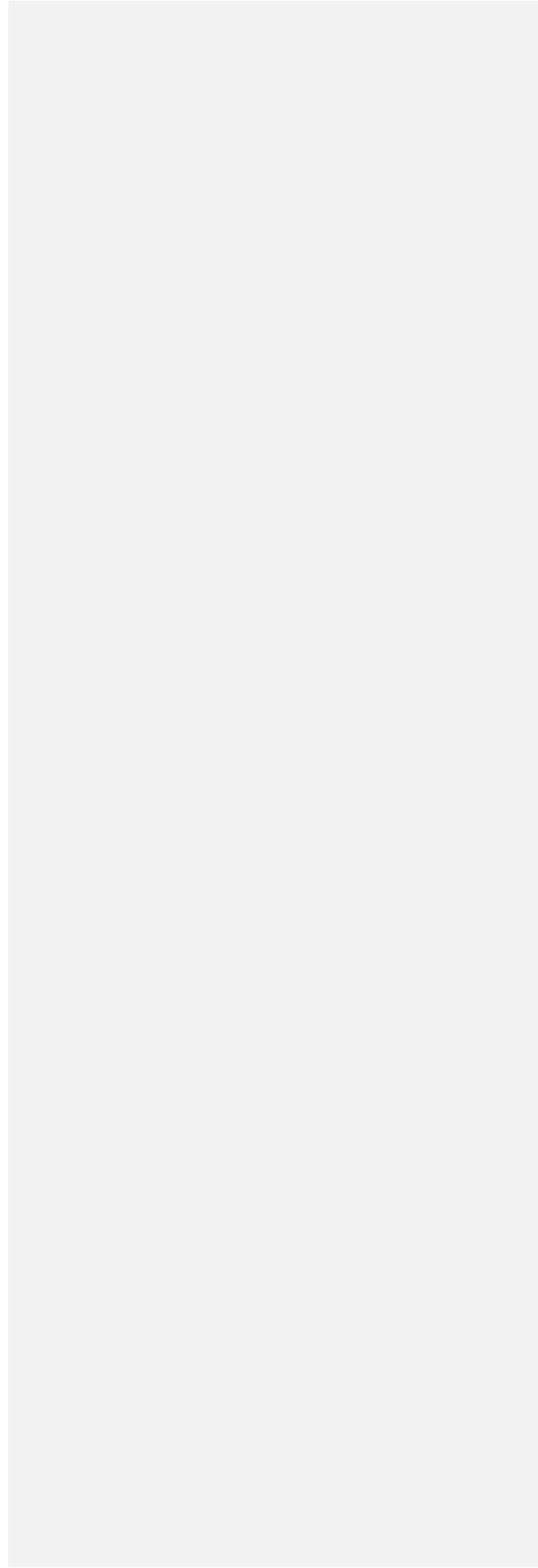


*When Gods
Bleed*

By
Njedeh Anthony



Chapter

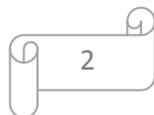
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King Nwosa appeared, covered with the skin of a lion, the head of the beast hanging on his shoulder. When he walked in, everyone in the conference room bowed. He looked around at the uninvited guests, namely the elders and the Ogun priest who was the Headman to the Oracle as well as the King's personal bodyguard.

After the King sat on his throne, all the men sat down. The elders broke kola nuts and distributed pieces in order of respect and then age, as is customary in such gatherings. The expression on their faces bothered the King and he knew they would not assemble at this time of the night for good news.

Probably the Wazike kingdom has declared war on us—the King thought to himself— but why would they break the peace treaty when my first wife is the daughter of their king?

To his immediate right sat the bony, big-eyed Headman to the Oracle, who wore the hides of a panther, and at his waist dangled the skull of a monkey. The Headman to the Oracle is a position that could only be ascended to by a Tikpapa, someone who has dedicated his life from youth to the study of



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supernatural powers, for curative and lethal applications. Around his neck hung the teeth of men and animals with whom he had done battle—a sign of a fearless chief, which he would need to be for the task ahead.

“To be the Headman to the Oracle, you have to not only be a warlock but you have to play politics with your King. Ogun Priest, you better have a good reason for waking me at this time when the sun fears to give out its light or you would soon be an ordinary Tikpapa of the Ogun God,” King Nwosa said, with an attempt at composure.

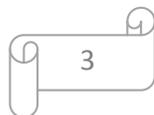
“Sire, the lion does not kill a cub that is not his because it’s wicked, but to prevent the growth of another generation that will grow to be his enemy. Winds—”

“Please,” the King interrupted, “I hope you did not wake me up to lecture me on lions.”

“No, Your Majesty. How long since your queen gave birth to an heir?”

“Eight full moons ago,” the King responded through clenched teeth.

“Have you seen the child in the eight days?” the Ogun priest asked, knowing the answer.



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“Ogun Priest, are you trying to spice my anger? You and I both know that I have not seen this child because,” Nwosa arched his brow, “custom demands that the heir has to cry before being brought to the presence of the King.”

“Sire, a normal child cries immediately after it leaves its mother’s belly and nobody except your wife's servants have seen this child,” one of the elders joined in.

“All right, you men have proved a point; my son is not your normal child. Or are you trying to tell me that the child did not come out safely?” The King pounded his right hand in his palm.

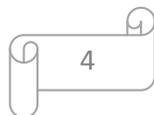
“The child was delivered safely, but the child hasn’t cried for eight days,” another Elder replied.

“I hope you have something else to tell me or else heads will roll for this disturbance.”

“Yesterday I went to the oracle to inquire about the abnormality of the child's birth and the reply is what has brought all of us here,” the Ogun priest said solemnly.

“Speak man!” the King shouted, leaning forward.

“The oracle says the south wind has touched the earth at a point where the blood of life has lost its sweetness. Destiny has created dispute between man and gods. Wisdom carries a



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weight that is unbearable to man with a poisonous form of reality. The birth of joy has brought a change in the color of the wind and the transformation of a legacy.”

“Talk to me in a language I can understand.”

“The child your wife gave birth to will end a chain that was bound by our etiquette.”

“What exactly are you saying'?” the King stammered.

Looking down, the Ogun priest responded. “The prince has to be sacrificed to the gods or there will be damage in the dynasty.”

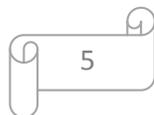
“I have heard you all, now I would like to speak to my Tikpapa alone.”

Immediately, everyone except the Ogun priest left the room.

“How dare you go to those old men before coming to me with this information?”

“I was positive you would not want to give the life of the child to me if it was a secret,” the Tikpapa said in an apologetic tone and still avoiding eye contact.

“So what if I did not want my only son dead?”



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“You do not know the extent of danger this child your wife bore carries. The gods are hungry for his life.”

“Ogun Priest, you and I both know how difficult it is for people in our family lineage to produce men. I was the only male child of fifty-six children and even now I have eight and all are girls.”

“If it be the will of the gods that you bear no more sons, then so shall it be. But as King, it is your solemn duty to produce this child for sacrifice to earn the respect you deserve from both your ancestors and this generation. My King, understand that this offering is unavoidable. When you met with me,” the Ogun priest chose his words carefully, “about the assassination of your father, the late King Burobee, I was with you all the way.”

“Would you stop deceiving yourself with all that patriotic rubbish? Before we poisoned the man, were you not just an ordinary Tikpapa? And see how long it took you to overcome the Awnu priest. Sometimes I begin to wonder if the Awnu god is greater than the Ogun,” the King retorted.

“The delay in overcoming of the Awnu god was my fault, but there is no comparison between my god and the dead man's god. Sire, this is not about your fatherly stand, but the sacrifice of a child whose destiny we cannot understand.”

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“Then take the child if it will make all of you sleep better at night, but the first man who comes to me disturbing me about an heir, I will personally slash his throat.”

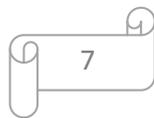
The Ogun priest lay flat on the floor as a mark of maximum respect as he spoke. “Every man who walks in this kingdom will walk with pride that they have a great King.”

“I said take the child now before I change my mind,” the King shouted.

As the Ogun priest left, the King sat down and felt how transient life really was.

Queen Aneaton paced to and from the walls of her room in anticipation of receiving her elder sister, who arrived in the still of the night. Queens dwelt in their own palace; only their female servants, female relatives, female guards and the King were allowed inside.

The Queen’s palace was guarded by female Omees, trained warriors who have dedicated their lives to either the government or an institution. There were two types of female warriors—the Ikuvamee and the Wovamee.



An Ikuvamee was a girl who was given to the government at age eight by parents who believed she was not pretty enough to attract a husband. The parents received a settlement from the government instead of waiting for a dowry from a husband that might never come. After all their training procedures, they were assigned to a particular queen or the wife of a chief. They were women of high regard and extremely dangerous.

The Wovamee did not belong to the government; they operated under private ownership. In most cases, they were extremely beautiful and extremely dangerous. These female warriors infiltrated fortresses and got their tasks done by any means necessary—using sex, dressing and behaving like a man, or even killing men, women and children. They came to join the organization out of their own free will, and most were married and poor. The kingdom did not recognize the Wovamees; people in the top hierarchy denied their existence; their identities were secret. Even the Wovamees didn't know who their leader was; they hardly cared, as long as they got paid. Before these women were accepted, they underwent a training and test period under supervision of Ikazas. An Ikaza was either a publicly dismissed chief or general. Only the Ikazas had access to the person or people who owned the organization and they took the secret to their graves.

Queen Aneaton wondered why her sibling, who had just given birth, would come to see her at this time of night. They had never been close, and her jealousy of Nneka went back to their childhood. She did not understand why, because she was prettier, smarter, and was even their mother's favorite child. Notwithstanding the envy, she knew she would never let harm come to her sister, the woman who should have been queen.

Everyone but Nneka knew the King had come to take her to be his bride—until he saw Aneaton. At the time, Aneaton had no regrets, but she later began to covet the happiness her sister found in a simpler life. Nneka got married to an Ikaza who made her his only wife. She had fewer possessions than the Queen, but more of the things that mattered. However, the Queen never forgot they were sisters. When the King tried repeatedly to arrest her sister's husband because he believed all Ikazas were involved in Wovamee contracts, the Queen each time made sure the case went away.

As soon as she saw her sister, she wanted to run and hug her, but the Queen is expected to disengage herself from physical contact with anybody in the midst of observers. Nneka came toward her with a child in her arms and bowed. The Queen responded by nodding and waving to the Ikuvamees and her servants to leave the room.

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“Nneka.”

“Your Highness, I came immediately after I heard.”

“Would you stop fooling yourself? Since when did you start addressing me as *your highness* when we are alone?”

“The hyenas continue to eat the cubs of lions until they become full grown lions, then they fear them.”

“Nonsense, my dear sister, the blood that flowed in my veins before I became queen is still the same. Now let me see my little nephew. How old is he?”

“He is ten days old. Sorry about the way he is crying. Since the day I gave birth to him, the child has been crying continuously.” Nneka’s tone was soft.

“The tortoise looks up into the sky and wonders why he cannot fly like a bird, whilst the bird wonders how it feels to roam the earth on its feet. Your child cries and it brings you grief, while my child refuses to shed a tear.”

“It happens at times. When I gave birth to Odagwe, he did not cry for close to a day.”

“A day? Do you come here to poison my heart?” The Queen angrily turned her back to her sister.

“Aneaton, I do not understand the language you speak. I came here with the softest heart to see the man who will be king, whose mother is my sister. If not that I, too, was giving birth to my own son, I would have been here sooner.” Nneka spoke softly, the teardrops falling from her eyes. “If you want me to leave your palace then I suggest you tell me now.”

“I am sorry Nneka, but things are not going the way they are supposed to be and I am losing my sanity,” the Queen said, now facing her sister.

“I came with my son in the dead of the night to meet you. Believe me when I tell you that I am here for you.”

“Nneka, since I gave birth to the child, he has not shed a tear. Even the King has not seen his son. At first I thought it was normal, but now even a dunce would recognize the abnormality of the situation. Very soon they would take my baby away from me. Maybe the child was born to be a thorn on the gods so they might have to take its life.”

“You do not have to lose control, Your Majesty.”

“Stop calling me that! I can accept it from a farmer who walks on the road, chiefs who come to my presence, traders who offer me the finest linen, northerners who offer us their horses, but I refuse to accept it from you.”

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“Okay, *Aneaton*, nobody can hurt your child,” Nneka said confidently. “He is the heir to the throne.”

“Someone heard under the mango tree that elders are coming for my son. My heart wishes that the words you speak were strong enough to hold water.”

“Now let’s replace this darkness in our mood with some sunlight. So where is my nephew, the son of the soil, the firmness of the earth, and the greatest king our kingdom will ever produce?”

Queen *Aneaton* clapped her hands. Her servants approached. She made a sign to them and they brought the prince to his aunt.

As Nneka held the child, she felt a bond. His eyes seemed to open doors into her heart.

“What’s his name?”

“How can I name a child that has not shed a tear and may never?”

“Stop talking this way, *Aneaton*. I do not like it.”

“Forget my son. What is the name of yours?”

“His father calls him *Obi*, but I prefer calling him *Obiani*.”

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“Obiani. You named the child, *the heart of the land*,” the Queen said with smile.

An Omee with an axe in hand entered the room and bowed. “My Queen, sorry for disturbing you, but the Ogun priest requires your presence at the gates.”

“What does he want at this time of the night?” the Queen asked, not really wanting to know.

“He refused to say. He said it required your personal attention.”

“Tell him I am on my way.”

As the Omee left, Queen Aneaton looked at her sister and said, “Look after my son.”

Nneka wanted to say something, but the words could not find their way out of her lips. She watched her sister walk away and wished he came for anything but the child.

As Queen Aneaton walked toward the bamboo gates, she saw the Ogun priest outside with two-dozen Omees, all carrying burning torches and armed with ivory-handled bronze swords. The seriousness in the Ogun priest’s face made her realize that blood could define the end of the day. She saw the readiness of the Ikuvamees and her confidence level rose.

“I wonder, what brings the Ogun priest to my home at this time of the night?” the Queen asked him.

“Accept my apologies for coming at this time, but your son is required for sacrifice,” the Ogun priest said in a direct manner.

“Let me understand this situation. You wake me up to tell me I should produce my son for sacrifice—my only son. A vulture waits for its prey to die before it devours it, so let’s cut the long story short. I will never, I mean never, give my son to you.”

Immediately after Queen Aneaton spoke the word “never,” her warriors drew their swords, spears, axes, knives, bows and arrows while the men around the Ogun priest raised their weapons for battle.

“Aneaton, I can understand your maternal instinct over my orders to you to bring the child, but I have directives from the King, your husband, to take the child, so please leave this unnecessary boldness behind and give me the child.”

“Orders? You are a knowledgeable man, and I expect you to know when a Queen says no, she means it.” As Queen Aneaton spoke, she could feel the tension burning on both sides of the gates. Her heart pounded harder than festival drums. Her words were the only things that didn’t shake.

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“I don't think you understand the situation. I will pretend you did not disobey the laws of our King, our custom and this kingdom. People will die for your stubbornness and I guarantee you I will have that child before the cock crows. For the last time, woman, give me the child.”

“Over...my...dead...body!” Queen Aneaton screamed.

“Then so it shall be.”

The Ogun priest spread his arms, a horde of men broke down the gates, and the collision began.

Arrows and spears flew in the air, swords clashed and warriors cried in pain. During the battle, Queen Aneaton knew that she could never win. Notwithstanding the fact that her warriors outnumbered the priest's Omees, she was aware that nature made men physically stronger than women and even if her warriors won the war now, it would mean total annihilation later. So she chose to get her satisfaction by another means. She sighted the Ogun priest walking majestically around the battle zone killing any female warrior that came his way. Then she took a bow and arrow, aimed, and fired from behind him. The arrow traveled like a hawk seeking its prey. When it was about a hand's length from his back, the Ogun priest made a swift turn and caught the arrow in the air. He looked at Queen Aneaton, grinned and made a gesture with his fingers.

At that point she knew it was over. She ran up to see her child for the last time. As she got to the top of the platform leading to the palace, right in front of her the Ogun priest appeared. He gripped her firmly around the neck, clamping hard enough to make her breathless.

“Aneaton, save me the trouble of looking for the child and I will give a very quick death. Where is the child?”

Queen Aneaton tried to speak, but the words weren't coming out clearly.

“I can't hear you. Sorry, forgive me. I am holding your neck too tightly,” The Ogun priest said, releasing his grip. “You may talk now.”

“Over my dead body,” Queen Aneaton gasped.

“That will not be a problem.”

The Ogun priest took his dagger out of the scabbard and was about to strike when Nneka shouted, “No! I am with the child, take him.”

As she spoke, she gave him the crying baby.

Queen Aneaton was still gasping when she saw the child. She tried to shout, but the words came out very soft. “No, Nneka, no.”

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“Is this life not funny? All the child had to do was cry about two days ago and he would have been the prince. Now the oracle requires his life,” the Ogun priest said with an ugly grin.

“Now you have the child. Please let my sister go,” Nneka pleaded.

“Queen Aneaton has committed a crime against the King, the customs and our kingdom and that is punishable by death.” Without a thought, the Ogun priest plunged the knife deeply into her chest and took the child away.

Nneka ran to her sister's side as she was dying. Her sister wanted to say lots of things, but the only words that came from her mouth before she died were, “Thank you.”

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