

NNEDI  OKORAFOR

IKENGA



VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2020

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE
ISBN 9780593113523

Printed in the USA Set in LTC Kennerley Book design by Jim Hoover

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“Don’t make me angry. You wouldn’t
like me when I’m angry.”

—David Banner from *The Incredible
Hulk* television series

1

A Sad Farewell with Pepper

NNAMDI DIDN'T WANT to look at his father's body in the casket, so he looked at the side of his mother's face instead. He sat beside her, his relatives all around him. He wanted to hold his mother's hand, but he didn't dare. Her black head wrap was perched on her head, all sharp starched angles. Auntie Ugochi, his mother's sister, had helped her put it on. If it weren't for Auntie Ugochi, his mother would have stayed in bed, sobbing.

Nnamdi's eyes fell on his mother's gold earrings. She only wore these on special occasions. Nnamdi figured the burial of his father was special enough. He stared at his mother now and she didn't notice. Her face was a terrible mess. Her dark brown eyes were red and puffy, her black mascara was running down her cheeks, and her nose was wet with tears and snot. The handkerchief someone had given her was soaked through with tears.

“My husband. *Ewo, ewo, ewo,*” she kept whispering as she gazed at the body of Nnamdi’s father. He was yards away, lying in an open ebony casket under the black tent next to the high-reaching palm tree that grew beside the house. He was dressed in his impeccable police chief uniform, the same type of uniform he’d been wearing on the night he died. Except this one didn’t have three holes in the chest and back. The murder of Nnamdi’s father exactly two weeks ago was still unsolved.

The sun was especially harsh today, and even under the tent, it was sweltering hot. The humid heat blew as a wave of grief pressed down on Nnamdi’s shoulders. He ran his hand over his freshly trimmed rough hair and turned from his mother to look somewhere else. For a while, he watched the women with the drums perform their burial dance before him. They wore matching blue dresses and cowry shells that clicked on their ankles. As they danced, they kicked up dust. The band had a guitar and bass player, a flutist, and three more drummers, and they played a variety of songs from highlife to traditional. Normally, Nnamdi would have enjoyed the music.

Suddenly, all the dancers missed their rhythm. The drummers lost their beat. The guitarist’s fingers slipped. And the flutists missed their notes. All Nnamdi’s relatives, family, friends, acquaintances—the two hundred people sitting on benches, standing, and crying in the large spacious compound—all looked toward the entranceway on the left side.

Auntie Ugochi leaned toward his mother's ear and Nnamdi heard her mutter, "This man has no shame."

His mother snatched Nnamdi's hand and squeezed hard. "Keep playing, keep dancing!" she barked at the musicians and dancers. A drummer beat out a floundering rhythm and the dancers moved distractedly.

Nnamdi didn't want to look. He knew who he'd see. "Never shy away from conflict," his father had once told him. "Look it in the eye and deal with it." And his mother had stood behind his father and added, "Courage, my son. Your father means you should have courage but be *smart* about it."

So Nnamdi turned to look. He saw a procession of ten fashionably dressed, gold- and diamond-wearing, attention-usurping women and men filing into the compound. Nnamdi tried to stand up straight with his chin up, as his father would have. But instead, fear made him slump in his seat and barely lift his head.

Nnamdi remembered his father angrily talking about these individuals. "Everyone knows who they are, but people are too afraid to confront them. If anything, people treat them like Nollywood movie stars." These were the most prominent criminals in Kaleria.

That regal old woman wearing the red *abada* textile clothing had to be Mama Go-Slow. His father was right: indeed, she did "walk like a buffalo," and her expensive outfit was thrown off balance by her signature wide, blocky black shoes. The man in the suit that was too big for his skinny

frame must be Never Die, the thief who had been shot by police many times but remained alive. Nnamdi was also sure he spotted Bad Market and Three Days' Journey, too. All of them were strutting like celebrities on the red carpet, when they were actually unwanted guests at the chief of police's burial service.

Leading this procession was an expensively dressed man who was even shorter than Nnamdi. Nnamdi's stomach dropped and his hands grew cold. The man looked more like a movie star than any of the others. He was handsome and carried himself like he expected the world to bow at his feet.

This was the very man most, including Nnamdi, believed was responsible for his father's murder: the Chief of Chiefs. If he hadn't been the one to pull the trigger, he'd certainly paid and ordered someone to do it. The problem was there was no proof, no gun registration, no witnesses, no confessions, nothing. It was as if a ghost had shot his father and then fled back to the spirit world to laugh about it.

But truth outshone evidence and Nnamdi knew. Everyone knew. And though he'd never seen the Chief of Chiefs with his own eyes, he was sure this was him right now. Waltzing into his father's funeral with the confidence of a ghost. Nnamdi pressed against his mother as she squeezed his hand harder. The Chief of Chiefs was the smallest grown man Nnamdi had ever seen, but he knew that this guy was the biggest crime lord in all of Kaleria, maybe even in all of Southeastern Nigeria. Kaleria was a small suburb of Owerri,

so this didn't make the Chief of Chiefs anywhere as infamous as the greatest crime lords in the mega-city of Lagos. However, the Chief of Chiefs certainly dined with and had the ear of those big Lagos men.

There were so many crazy rumors about the guy. Some said that he owned huge homes on every continent, all bought with his dirty money. That he was so filthy rich that he bathed with soap made from crushed pink diamonds. That he was so successful in his criminal activity because he was the descendant of a demon and Mami Wata, the water goddess. And that at night he slept with earplugs in his ears because the sound of the stars twinkling kept him up. Nnamdi didn't believe any of this, but that didn't make the man any less creepy.

Nnamdi's father had been a good chief of police. Many times, the wives and mothers of people who his father had helped came to his house bearing gifts. Nnamdi would eavesdrop from the kitchen as these women thanked his father, while his mother brought iced tea or orange Fanta to drink. "Thank you, sir," one of the women sobbed. Thieves had once gutted her house when she was on vacation. Angry and disgusted, Nnamdi's father had personally investigated and pursued the case, and then he and a team of officers apprehended the thieves. "These stupid thieves are so cruel; you have the brave heart of a lion." The next day, the story was all over Kaleria's popular newsletter, the *Kaleria Sun*, and Nnamdi had gone to school so proud that day.

Nnamdi's father refused all bribes and his efforts were starting to result in a decrease in petty crime in Kaleria. He'd just turned his efforts toward the Chief of Chiefs, the apex of the town's crime. His father came home one evening, so excited. He'd talked about a big meeting he'd called at the department. He'd drawn charts on the dry-erase board as officers threw out ideas, and the department put together a great plan that would target each of the Chief of Chiefs' main cohorts while diplomatically approaching the Chief of Chiefs.

His father and the infamous Chief of Chiefs had sat down in the police station to discuss a compromise. Even the press was invited to witness this. The resulting news article was titled "The Meeting of Two Chiefs." During this meeting, the Chief of Chiefs promised to turn his energy toward combating the growing crime and corruption in Kaleria instead of fueling it. "You cannot build a palace in a ghetto," the Chief of Chiefs had been quoted saying. There was even a photo of the two men grinning and shaking hands. Two nights later, his father was murdered.

Father would want to spit at all these stupid people, Nnamdi thought. Everyone in the compound was staring at the Chief of Chiefs and his entourage. They breathed through their mouths and stood or sat frozen, as if they'd forgotten who they were. *Idiots!* Nnamdi thought. *Such a disgrace to stare like this.* He frowned when he realized he, too, was staring. He closed his mouth. Nearby, one of his uncle's wives was carrying her newborn and the child

screached. The sound made Nnamdi's heart jump; it reminded him of his mother's bloodcurdling scream when the police had told her his father had been killed. But first there was the bloody letter on the night of his father's murder. Nnamdi shuddered.

It was a Friday night, around eight o'clock, the time when his father usually came home. There was a loud knock on the door. *Odd*, Nnamdi thought. His father had his own keys, of course. When Nnamdi opened the door, he saw a letter on the ground. His name was printed on the envelope, so he picked it up and tore it open. He found a piece of paper, which he unfolded. His entire body went numb. The writing on the paper was brown red, not black or blue. Nnamdi blinked. He knew exactly what he was seeing, but it took several moments to fully register. The letter was written in blood and he wanted to drop it like a poisonous spider. Nothing written in blood could be good, especially when you were the son of the chief of police. He read:

When you dine with the Devil, bring a long spoon. Tell your mother that your father's spoon was too short.

Sincerely,
The Chief of Chiefs

Nnamdi stood there, reading the letter over and over. As he read, his night grew darker, a shadow descending over him. He quickly looked up, breathing hard, sure someone was there. But he was alone. His father had told him before that the Chief of Chiefs was dangerous, powerful, and clever. When Nnamdi asked for more details about him, his father always looked very sad, shook his head, and said, “Someday, but not today.” And now this super-dangerous man not only knew who Nnamdi was, but he’d written him a letter? He remembered looking out into the night, wondering if the Chief of Chiefs was hiding out there, too small to spot, deadly like the most venomous snake.

“What is that?” his mother had asked, coming up behind him and taking the letter.

As she read it, Mr. Oke, their lanky old gateman, came running from his post accompanied by Constable Ukoro. “I’m so sorry, Ma,” Ukoro said, his beret clutched to his chest. “Your husband has been shot. He is dead.” That was when Nnamdi’s mother had screamed the terrible scream that still haunted his nightmares. According to lab test results, the letter had been written in goat’s blood.

The next day, his father’s death was front-page news in the *Kaleria Sun*. Nnamdi and his mother were appalled to see that the newsletter printed the Chief of Chiefs’ words, even including a photo of the actual letter. To add insult to injury, Nnamdi was quoted in the article: “‘I’m terrified!’ the eleven-

year-old son of murdered Police Chief Egbuche Icheteka said.”

Nnamdi was so mortified that he'd broken out into a cold sweat after reading it and had then hidden in his room that entire day. Police officers and investigators had come to their house the night of the shooting to ask questions. A man in jeans and a T-shirt had asked Nnamdi how he felt about the letter from the Chief of Chiefs. How was Nnamdi supposed to know the guy was a reporter?!

Now Nnamdi watched as the Chief of Chiefs chatted with the guests at his father's burial. His entourage of criminals was like a cackle of hyenas come to laugh at the corpse of a fallen lion. *I can't believe this*, Nnamdi thought, fire burning in his chest.

After a few minutes, the Chief of Chiefs approached Nnamdi and his mother. Nnamdi forced himself to move from behind to stand beside her. Every nerve in his body tensed and he felt sweat trickling down his face into his collar. He clenched his stomach muscles and hands to try to stop shaking, but it was no use.

The Chief of Chiefs was dressed in an immaculate flowing white agbada that made him look like a rolling snowball, and white trousers with golden cuffs. On his feet he wore white designer slippers that looked like they were made from clouds. If it weren't for his long, well-oiled black goatee and gold-rimmed glasses, he could have passed for an overdressed child. Nnamdi blinked. The man's short stature had blinded

his perception for a moment. The Chief of Chiefs was no stylish child, he reminded himself. And that was when his eyes fell on the Chief of Chiefs' right hand. On his wrist he wore a white-gold watch, but on his right index finger . . . Nnamdi's heart jumped, unable to tear his eyes from the heavy gold ring.

Horror descended on him as he felt warm wetness in his pants. *Oh my God*, he thought. But he couldn't stop it from happening. He'd urinated on himself. He wanted to run into the house, but instead, he froze. Thankfully, he was wearing a long black caftan and black pants.

Nnamdi knew the ring was heavy because he'd held it before. It was solid gold and in the shape of a dragon eating its tail. An Ouroboros. He knew all this because it was his father's ring. His father had had that ring since starting as a police officer twenty-five years ago. Nnamdi had asked his father about it and had even tried it on a few times. It had his father's name engraved on the inside. Nnamdi frowned, his face hot and his wet pants itchy and cold. He glanced at where his father lay, but he couldn't bring himself to go and see if the ring was still on his finger.

"We've come to pay our utmost respects to Chief Egbuche Icheteka," the Chief of Chiefs said to Nnamdi's mother. The man spoke with the clarity of a professor. "We're very sorry for your loss."

He held out a fat envelope to Nnamdi's mother. She

glanced at it with a pinched face and flared nostrils. Nnamdi held his breath. He only saw this look when his mother was about to lose her temper. Nnamdi's auntie Ugochi quickly reached forward and took the envelope. She opened it and glanced inside. Nnamdi leaned forward to see. The envelope was packed with money! Nnamdi shivered and became more aware of the wetness making his legs itchier. In a few minutes, he'd start to stink. *I have to get out of here*, he thought.

"Thank you," Auntie Ugochi quickly said, placing a hand firmly on Nnamdi's mother's shoulder. His mother softly hissed, biting her lip. "My sister is too distraught to speak."

"That is understandable," the Chief of Chiefs said. "Such a great man . . . shot down in the prime of his life. What will become of our Kaleria?"

Nnamdi's stomach churned with acid. The envelope was probably filled with thousands of naira or maybe even euros or American dollars. This man had killed his father and was now showering his mother with money. Nnamdi balled his fists, imagining punching the Chief of Chiefs in the face. His legs tensed as he considered kicking him in his privates. But instead, Nnamdi held himself still, squeezing his mother's hand.

He bit his lip hard as he watched the Chief of Chiefs amble off and mingle with some of Nnamdi's aunts and even members of the police department. His uncle Ike even hugged the Chief of Chiefs and began talking animatedly with him,

as if he were privileged to get the Chief's attention. How could any of them *speak* with him? At his father's funeral? How could his auntie not let his mother tell the man off? What was wrong with everyone? But Nnamdi himself also said nothing. *Look at me*, he thought, tears blurring his vision. *Daddy would be ashamed*. The moment his mother started talking to his aunt, he made for the house.

You won't get away with this, Chief, he thought to himself as he threw open the door. *None of you will! You will all be rotting in jail or dead by this time next year*. He had no idea what he was saying or what he'd do, but he'd do *something*. Just before going inside, he turned around and looked across the compound toward the tent where his father's body lay. Tears cooled his face. In the back of his mind, a snide voice said, *Stop talking big words. You think you're one of the superheroes in your comic books? Those are just simple idealistic stories and you're just a child*.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he jumped. The tension eased as he turned to see that it was his uncle Innocent. Nnamdi quickly wiped his wet face and tried to blink away his tears. "I know how you feel," Uncle Innocent said softly. "But take comfort; God will punish them."

That night, Nnamdi's mother was too upset to notice more than her own tears. But Nnamdi was alert. He'd noticed three things were missing. There had been one last can of

tomato paste in the kitchen cupboard. Nnamdi remembered because his mother had mentioned that she wanted to go to the market for more as soon as everything settled down. It had been in the top right cupboard. It wasn't there anymore.

And in the bathroom the glass apple that sat on the toilet's tank was gone. His father had hated that apple and was always complaining about it. Whenever he saw it, his father humphed with irritation and said in his deep, gruff voice, "What is the point of an apple made of glass?!" As a way to playfully annoy his father, Nnamdi's mother had placed the glass apple on the tank of the toilet. Now it was gone.

And then there was the red pillow that his mother loved to put behind her back when she sat in the chair in the bedroom. It wasn't memorable in any way. It wasn't exceptionally lumpy, nor was it pretty or ugly. It wasn't given to her by anyone special. It wasn't very old or very new. It was just a pillow. And it was gone.

Who had taken these little things? Nnamdi was sure he knew. He was positive. The whole compound had been full of criminals. The thief was one of them. Maybe *Mama Go-Slow* or *Never Die* or *Three Days' Journey*. But certainly, it was upon the orders of the Chief of Chiefs. Stealing insignificant things from the house of the police chief he'd just murdered was icing on the cake.

Nevertheless, for now, Nnamdi knew he and his mother had to just make it to tomorrow. Without his father.

2

A Year Later

NNAMDI TOUCHED THE ant and it ran wildly behind one of the tiger lily's orange petals. Normally, Nnamdi avoided these large black ants. They had a painful bite. But today, he'd have almost welcomed the pain. Anything to get his mind off the fact that today was exactly a year since his father's murder. His *still unsolved* murder. He flicked the flower with his finger, knocking the ant and three of the wild lily's five petals to the ground. His father would have been angry with him for doing that. But his father was not here. The reality of this washed over him, warm and sour, yet again. He shut his eyes.

He went to the base of the mango tree and picked up his backpack. There were ants climbing all over it. This mango tree had always been occupied by them. His father used to say that if you tried to chop the tree down, the ants would probably attack you. Nnamdi smacked his backpack sever-

al times, then he closely inspected it to make sure the ants were all gone. He hoisted it onto his back. It was heavy with schoolbooks.

He sighed. The sight of his father's dying garden added to the weight in his heart. His father had planted this garden years before Nnamdi had been born.

"I had a dream," his father had told Nnamdi. "It was the night after I started as the chief of police. Oh, it was an awful dream. I saw Kaleria burning. The houses, the business buildings, the market, the cars on the roads. And as it was burning, it was being overrun by criminals like Never Die, Mama Go-Slow, and Three Days' Journey!" He chuckled. "I was under so much stress. Chief of police is a heavy job and I wanted to do it right. I had a friend in university who used to garden to relieve stress. If it worked for him, I thought, it could work for me."

And Nnamdi figured it must have, because his father never had the nightmare again. At least, not that Nnamdi knew of. Over time the garden became his father's place to relax. Nnamdi's mother said that after he became chief of police, the garden grew like crazy. The more Kaleria's well-being became his responsibility, the more he planted and cultivated and maintained. He even grew yams here. Nnamdi sometimes sat in the garden at the base of the palm tree that grew there and read comic books, but rarely did he garden with his father. It was an unspoken rule: These plants were his *father's*

projects. You could hang out in his space, but only if you didn't mess with anything.

Since his death, not surprisingly, the garden had fallen into neglect. His mother did what she could, but she focused mainly on those plants that could feed her and Nnamdi: the tomatoes, peppers, and onions. She let the rest of the garden get overrun by weeds. As for Nnamdi, he rarely came out here at all. Now only wild grass, aggressively creeping touch-and-die plants, and tiger lilies were thriving here. He ran his toe over a bunch of touch-and-die plants and watched their fernlike leaves hastily close, the stems withering.

Nnamdi looked at his watch: school started in ten minutes. His mother would come looking out here soon. Still, he didn't move. His feet felt frozen, like when he'd seen the Chief of Chiefs.

"Nnamdi!" Chioma said, coming around the house. "Hurry up!"

She pushed her long untidy braids out of her face. Everything about Chioma Nwazota was long, from her gangly legs and arms to her bushy hair she usually braided herself. Nnamdi had known Chioma since they were babies. Where Nnamdi had always been on the quiet and intense side, Chioma was outspoken, upbeat, and playful. And she'd always been that friend who told him to move faster.

Chioma paused, staring at the garden. Nnamdi didn't think she'd been here since the funeral. Chioma was adopted

and though her adoptive mother loved her to pieces, her father had never wanted to adopt her and told her so whenever he got the chance. Nnamdi's father, on the other hand, had always smiled when he saw Chioma and he happily gave her advice the many times she sought him out for it. Nnamdi's father had been more of a father to Chioma than any man. And Chioma was the only person Nnamdi had ever seen garden alongside his father. Knowing her, she'd probably just walked in on him one day and picked up a hoe (something Nnamdi never had the nerve to do), but that didn't change this fact.

"Nnamdi!" she called again. "What are you doing? We're going to be late."

"I'll walk fast," Nnamdi muttered.

"Let's start walking then." She hoisted up her backpack and turned toward the house.

School was the usual routine and Nnamdi was glad when the day was over. He just wanted to sit, think, and brood. But first he wanted to eat a little something. He was so hungry. During lunch, he'd been so preoccupied with the fact of his father being gone a whole year that he'd stared off into space instead of eating. *A whole year*. He hadn't spoken to his father in a whole year. He could say that now.

"You want one?" Chioma asked, offering him a biscuit from the package she'd just opened. "They're really *delicious*."

Nnamdi took one. It was surprisingly buttery and flaky. He smiled. Chioma smiled, too, handing him three more. “That’s better,” she said. “No one wants to look at a long face.”

They walked in silence for a moment and then Nnamdi asked, “You know what today is, right?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. She handed him another biscuit.

He took it. “You’re coming next week?” he asked.

“To Chief’s memorial?” She always called his father “Chief.”

Nnamdi nodded.

“Of course,” she said, shoving a biscuit into her mouth. “Hey, remember that day in Chief’s garden when I caught that huge blue butterfly?” Chioma asked. “He was watering the tomatoes and you were leaning against the fence?”

Nnamdi remembered that day well. It was three years ago. The garden attracted lots of butterflies and Chioma loved them. That late afternoon she’d caught and released a large blue butterfly and the sheer delight on her face as she watched it fly away made his father laugh. Great big belly laughs that soon got Nnamdi laughing, too, and Chioma rolling her eyes.

“Chief looked so tall that day,” she said. “His shadow stretched and stretched like he was a giant. Like he was invincible.” She glanced at Nnamdi and then looked away. “I really miss him.” She handed him another biscuit and he ate it.

A year since that terrible day. Almost a year since he'd made a useless, silly promise to himself while watching the Chief of Chiefs parade through his father's burial like the President of Nigeria.

"Well, how do you feel about . . . it?" she asked.

They were walking past the market. An old brown Toyota drove by, sending up a cloud of red dust that lingered in the hot, humid air. Nnamdi fanned the dust away, frowning. "I . . ."

"Whoo, Nnamdi," Chioma said, scrunching up her face. "Did you gas?"

Nnamdi hissed, annoyed. "No." Then he smelled it, too. Like rotten eggs. "Nasty," he said, flaring his nostrils.

"Phew! What is that?" Chioma asked.

"I don't know." But that wasn't quite true. *Could it be?* Nnamdi wondered. He frantically looked around for clues. Bad Market was known for causing a bad smell after he'd "collected" from people in the market. It was the cue to check your pockets and realize your valuables were long gone.

"Relax," Chioma said, eating another biscuit. "When Bad Market strikes, the smell comes fast and is *really, really* obvious. You won't just think farts; you'll think a monster farting in a nest of rotten meat! I have an auntie who was shopping once when he struck. She lost her wallet and wedding ring. And she said she never felt anything! But what she said was worst about it was the stink!"

Nnamdi only grunted. For the last week or so, he'd had a feeling that something bad was happening or had already happened somewhere. Today it was especially strong. Bad smells, faint or strong, always meant trouble. At least that's what his father used to say.

"Nnamdi," Chioma said. "You've been so quiet, even to me. What's on your mind, man?"

He paused, frowning. Then he looked at her concerned face, bit his lip, and spoke. "Okay, Chioma, honestly, I'm . . . I'm . . . I don't know. I just feel . . ." He looked hard at Chioma, wishing she'd just understand.

However, she only looked at him, waiting.

He sighed. "Remember when the Chief of Chiefs came to the burial?"

"Of course," she said, making a fist. "It was like he was rubbing it in your mother's face."

"And mine," Nnamdi added.

"We should find him and step on him," she said, dramatically stomping her foot on the ground. She grinned. "He's half of both our heights. We could take him."

Nnamdi chuckled sadly. "See, that's what I vowed to do that day. When he came, he made me so mad. I told myself I'd do something. But it's almost a year later and . . ." He shook his head. They stopped at the intersection and waited for several cars and trucks to pass. Then they ran across.

"So, is that why you're ashamed?" she asked as they

skirted around a burned-out car. Nnamdi wished someone would remove it. It was like a corpse. Actually, at one point, there *had* been a corpse inside it. Seven months ago, a drunk driver known all around Kaleria for nearly running people over had finally hit and killed a woman trying to cross the street. This was the last straw. Within a minute, an angry mob surrounded his car and set it on fire . . . with him inside. His father would *never* have allowed “jungle justice” to happen in Kaleria, let alone leave the burned-out vehicle on the side of the road. Times had certainly changed.

“I didn’t say I was ashamed.”

“I know,” she said. “But I *know* you. You don’t have to say it for me to know.”

“What?” Nnamdi rolled his eyes and kissed his teeth. “I just think I should do something,”

“About what? The Chief of Chiefs? The riffraff he works with? What *could* you do? Did you hear about Mama Go-Slow?”

Nnamdi nodded. “Yeah, she struck again yesterday, right?”

“At the height of evening traffic this time! The woman and her thugs are getting bold,” Chioma said. “My neighbor Father Raphael lost an entire batch of holy water and holy bread! He said some masked person appeared out of nowhere inside his car and then the person, water, and bread were gone!” She pressed her left eye with her index finger. “In the blink of an eye!”

“Even holy things aren’t safe,” Nnamdi said.

“I know, right? My mother says this town used to be rich and now it’s becoming rubbish. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Even your *father* couldn’t stop these people and all the corruption.”

They stopped at Chioma’s apartment building. “Here, have the rest,” she said, giving him the package of biscuits. Then she ran in. Nnamdi bit into one of the buttery biscuits as he watched her open the gate and go inside. She was right: Kaleria used to be rich. *But when the honey flows, the flies always smell it*, Nnamdi thought. His mother had said this the night after his father’s murder, when she was in an especially dark mood.

“There must be something I can do,” Nnamdi muttered as he headed home. “I’ll bet if Daddy could, he’d fight them all as a ghost.”

Nnamdi’s home was surrounded by a concrete wall. It was topped with barbed wire and broken glass, and built into it was a red metal gate. Each time the gateman pushed the gate open, Nnamdi noticed its hinges were beginning to rust. It made his heart heavy because he knew that if his father were alive, they’d have had enough money to fix it.

“Mr. Oke,” Nnamdi called. He hiked up his schoolbag and knocked on the gate. When there was no answer, he knocked again. He frowned. Mr. Oke, the gateman, was always at his post, ready to open or close the gate. He’d been their gateman

for over twenty years. The old man was a dear friend of his father's. Even now that his mother could only pay him half of what he was paid before, he stayed on, living in the guest quarters.

"Mr. Oke, it's me! Nnamdi!" Still no answer. "Where is he?" Then he heard it, ever so faintly. Sobbing. It was coming from beyond the gate. From inside the house? Nnamdi's cheeks grew hot and a shiver leapt up his spine. He started banging like crazy on the gate. "Mr. Oke! Mr. Oke, are you there?! What is happening?! Mr. Oke!" A car slowly passed on the lumpy dirt road behind him. He didn't turn around to see who it was. He didn't care. "Mr. Oke!"

Finally, he heard footsteps approach the gate, the clang of it being unlocked, and there stood Mr. Oke, a worried look on his wrinkly brown face. "Come," he said, taking Nnamdi's hand.

"What's going on?"

"Your mother was robbed on her way from the market," he said. "In broad daylight!"

"What?"

They moved quickly across the compound. Mr. Oke opened the front door, and the sound of his mother's sobbing was loud and clear. She was sitting on the couch, her head in her hands. Nnamdi ran inside.

"Mommy!" He threw his arms around her and hugged her. She leaned on him and sobbed into his shoulder.

“Nnamdi, why did your father leave us, o?!” she wailed. “Why did he leave us to suffer, o?!”

Nnamdi felt tears prick his eyes. He’d never seen his mother in such a state, even on the day she learned of his father’s death. No thief would have ever done this to her if his father were alive. Everyone knew who she was. But then again, his mother wouldn’t have been reduced to selling tapioca if his father were alive. Nnamdi looked at Mr. Oke with questioning eyes, unsure of what to do. Mr. Oke just shrugged.

“Mommy, what happened?” Nnamdi asked. “Where is your tray of tapioca?”

She looked at him, wiping the tears from her cheeks, and then straightened up, pursing her lips. Nnamdi gazed at his mother’s face. She’d become so dark now from all the time she spent in the sun, drying and then selling tapioca. A year after his father’s death, the little money they had had dried up and the police had turned a blind eye to their slain chief’s widow and son. Nnamdi had been unfamiliar with tapioca until his mother started selling it. He’d helped his mother arrange the shredded boiled stalks of cassava onto the tray every evening. “It’s poor man’s food,” his mother had said. “People chew it to keep hunger away.” They looked at each other and Nnamdi was sure she was thinking the same thing he was, that they were now in that group. Now something had happened to the food she sold to the poor.

“Mommy, what happened?”

“I dropped it,” his mother said. “It . . . it was that hoodlum, the one they keep shooting who always lives. The one they call Never Die. He followed me and waited until I was alone on the road and then demanded all my money! He said if I didn’t give it to him, he’d beat me right there on the road! I gave him all I had. Oh my God, what have I become, o?!” She started sobbing again.

“Get her some water,” Mr. Oke said.

Nnamdi nodded and rushed to the kitchen, glad to get away for a moment. As he opened a bottle of cold water and poured it into a glass, he took a deep, angry breath. “Some man of the house I am,” he grumbled. He closed his eyes. *If I could only buy her a car,* he thought. *Then at least she wouldn’t have to walk in the hot sun the way she does and risk running into thieves.* Even as he’d spoken to her, he’d noticed her feet. They looked tough as leather, despite the protection of her sandals, and her bunions looked a lot worse. Anger heated his chest. Anger at the police who had abandoned them. Anger at his own powerlessness. And most of all, anger at the Chief of Chiefs.

He took the glass of water to his mother and watched her drink. “Thank you, Nnamdi.”

He hugged his mother again.

Later, his feet took him to the back of the house, to his father’s garden. He walked among the weeds and sat down.

His eye fell on a feeble but still living yam vine.

“I’ll take care of you,” he whispered to the plant. He’d take care of the whole garden from now on, he decided. He sighed and then he wished for one thing with all his heart: that he was a grown man who could protect his mother. As he caressed the yam’s delicate green vine, he knew full well that it was a stupid wish.

3

The Ikenga

NNAMDI HATED THE brand-new scratchy white caftan and pants he had to wear and he resisted the urge to scratch in front of everyone. He was hot, the music was too loud, and he didn't want to talk to all these people. It seemed all of Kaleria had come out for the one-year memorial celebration of his father's life.

There were coolers full of jollof rice and goat meat, vegetable soup, spicy stew and pounded yam, fried plantain, and plenty of beer and palm wine. Free food, free festivities. Everyone was invited. And everyone came. It was nine p.m., and the party would probably continue well into the early morning. Nnamdi wondered how his mother could afford all this. He also knew that if he asked, his mother would only say, "God provides." Probably the women's club had paid for it. If that were true, he wondered why they didn't help out with money on other days.

His friends Ruff Diamond, Jide, and Hassan had come with their parents and siblings, of course. They stood near the wall, watching the guests mill about eating, talking, and dancing.

“Did you see that fine girl over there?” Ruff Diamond asked. He carried a plate of jollof rice and chicken in one hand and he shoveled some of the rice into his mouth with his plastic spoon.

“No,” Nnamdi said, rolling his eyes.

“That’s because you weren’t looking hard enough,” Ruff Diamond said. “Come on, have some fun. I’m tired of your sulking.” He held a spoonful of jollof rice to Nnamdi’s face. “Eat. It’s delicious and you look dried like stockfish.”

Nnamdi shoved the spoon away, cracking a smile. Debo Okunuga, known more commonly as Ruff Diamond, was bigger than Nnamdi, and each day after school he would bring out a pair of diamond earrings and put them on. “These teachers won’t let me wear my diamonds in class,” he would always say with a shrug. “Teachers, always jealous of rich guys like me!” Ruff Diamond was beyond proud of these earrings and claimed they cost two hundred and fifty thousand naira each. Nnamdi believed the earrings were expensive but not *that* expensive.

“Maybe you’re too busy looking for Chioma?” Jide said, pushing up his black glasses as he drank from a bottle of Coca-Cola. Nnamdi rolled his eyes again. For over a year, Nnamdi

had known that Jide was the one who liked Chioma, but Chioma never gave Jide the time of day.

“It’s my father’s memorial,” Nnamdi said. “Why would I . . . ?”

“Because the best place to meet girls is at events like this,” Hassan said. He put his plate, laden with only hunks of goat meat, on the ground just so that he could dramatically slap hands with Ruff Diamond. The two laughed raucously.

“Hey, I’m going to Abuja for a few days,” Ruff Diamond said. “The girls are fine there, sha. But not like here. You should keep your eyes open, Nnamdi.”

“So I can always remember that I met her at the anniversary of my father’s murder?” Nnamdi suddenly snapped. He paused, feeling the darkness and weight of his father’s death press on him yet again. His friends looked anywhere but at him. Nnamdi took a deep breath. “Sorry, guys,” he said.

Ruff Diamond patted him on the back. “It’s all right.”

Nnamdi was glad when his mother called him over to come and say hello to his grand-auntie Grace.

“Praise God,” Auntie Grace proclaimed, pulling him into a tight hug. She was very fat, tall, and strong and she wore a black drape of a dress made of a thick, coarse material. Hugging her was suffocating, hot, and scratchy. “Praise him, o! We are here today, gathered despite the loss of my sweet, sweet brother.”

“Yes, Auntie,” Nnamdi said, stepping back.

“Do you miss him?” she asked. Before Nnamdi could respond, she said, “I miss him. But he’s with God now.” She grinned at Nnamdi, though he knew full well that she wasn’t really seeing him. Auntie Grace was nice, but she was never fully there; she was always more occupied with whatever prayer she was praying.

“I prayed for him every day when he was alive,” she said. “When he was fighting all of those criminals. Trying to be Kaleria’s superhero. Do you like superheroes, Nnamdi?” He opened his mouth to answer. He loved superheroes. Especially icons like Naruto, Superman, Black Panther, Storm, and his favorite, the Incredible Hulk. Superheroes got to view the world differently because their lives were so crazy; they could be *anyone* and they could dive into danger when it was at its worst and win. Superheroes survived. Nnamdi would have loved to have a conversation about all this with even Auntie Grace but instead she kept talking. “Your father wasn’t a superhero; he was *more*. He was a messenger of God. Now he’s with the Lord.” She nodded, whispering, “He’s better off.”

Nnamdi frowned. He felt his father would have been better off with him and his mother. Auntie Grace’s attention was back to his mother and two other women. “We should all pray!” Auntie Grace proclaimed, putting a big hand on his mother’s shoulder.

Once his auntie started making people pray, those present lost at least an hour of their lives as she went on and on.

Nnamdi was standing behind her and he took the chance to slip away. He was between two tents, about to sneak away from the party, into the tall plants of his father's garden despite the mosquitoes and other night creatures when he heard, "Nnamdi! There you are!"

He cringed but then recognized the voice over all the noise. "Chioma," he said, turning around. He smiled. Like most of the girls and women at the memorial, she was wearing a *rapa* and matching top; hers was a loud yellow. She moved slowly, her tightly wrapped *rapa* limiting the length of her stride. Nnamdi and Chioma slapped hands.

"I've been here for twenty minutes but couldn't find you anywhere," she said. She took a sip from her bottle of Bitter Lemon.

"I'm not in the mood for any of this," he said, leaning against the wall of the house.

"Hmm. Well, the party's more for your mother, really," she said. "To usher her out of mourning and back into the community. You should be relieved. She won't have to wear black anymore." She patted her belly. "Whoo, I'm stuffed."

"I'm glad for my mum, but I don't really want to be here."

"Oh, Nnamdi," she laughed. "You're such a good, obedient son."

A shadow caught Nnamdi's eye and he turned and squinted in the darkness. "You see that?" he asked.

Chioma craned her neck and squinted, too. "No."

“What is that?” He stepped past Chioma for a better look. “Or *who*?” The shadow was human-shaped and heading toward the gate, moving around the vehicles parked on the blacktop around the compound. “Hey!” he called. Whoever it was stepped into the light and seemed to look at them. But even in the light shining from the house, Nnamdi could barely see him. Yes, it was a him. A man. Then the man did the impossible. He stepped right through the wall beside the open gate! At least that’s what Nnamdi thought he saw. The man skipped around the parked cars and disappeared from Nnamdi’s view.

“Hey!” Nnamdi called again, pushing the gate open and stepping through it.

Behind him, he heard Chioma shout, “Leave him. You don’t know who that is.”

Nnamdi caught another glimpse of the shadowy man. He seemed to be walking quickly down the street, disappearing into shadows and reappearing in pockets of light from houses and streetlights. The man stopped and gestured to Nnamdi to follow. Nnamdi hesitated, frowning. He blinked, thinking of his dead father, his mother robbed, the Chief of Chiefs disrespecting his father’s funeral last year, and something new washed over him. He tensed his body and balled his fists. “No,” he whispered. “This is *my* house.” He would protect his home by any means necessary. He took off after the shadowy man. “Hey!” he called.

“Nnamdi!” Chioma shouted. “It’s dark out there! Stop! Just let him go!”

Nnamdi ran into the darkness of the dirt road, frantically looking from side to side. There. He heard the man’s footsteps running off to the right, down the narrow track, and so he ran in that direction, too. The night was pitch-black as he passed gated house after gated house. The sound of the memorial celebration quickly faded, as did Chioma’s voice. The wind picked up and it propelled him faster. It was exhilarating to run like crazy in the dark after . . . what? A thief? He didn’t know. But now that he actually had a chance to do something, he was going to catch up with the man who had the nerve to come to his home uninvited.

He could hear his own *breathing* and the soft slap of his shoes in the dirt. His clothes were getting soiled, but he couldn’t worry about that at the moment. He rounded a bend. Thankfully, he knew this road like the back of his hand, even in the dark. He wasn’t far from where the old woman liked to fry and sell *akara*. He stopped and his legs shook with adrenaline.

There stood the man.

Yards away, under the streetlight.

Waiting?

Nnamdi’s entire body was shaking. But as he stared at the shadowy man, he felt his heart leap. “Oh my God,” he whispered. The man wasn’t a shadow anymore. Nnamdi

paused. Then he slowly walked toward him. The man was tall and wore black pants, a black long-sleeved shirt, and . . . a green beret. Nnamdi stopped, four feet away, his heart doing a dance in his chest. The man's back was turned. Standing about six feet tall, his shoulders were broad and slightly hunched forward. His hands were at his sides, the fingers thick and long. Nnamdi breathed through his mouth and shut his eyes. When he opened them, the man was still there. There was only one thing to ask. "Daddy? Daddy, is that you?"

The night was warm and dark. The streets were empty. Nnamdi's world had become the patch of land beneath the streetlight, the man, and himself. Nnamdi stepped into the light and the man turned around. Nnamdi's mouth fell open, the world swam around him, and then his vision cleared. He looked deep into his father's eyes.

"Nnamdimma, my son," his father whispered.

"But . . . you're dead," Nnamdi said. "I saw . . . your body at . . . at the funeral." The breeze blew, and right before his eyes he saw his father's chest and head grow transparent and then solid again. "Heeeeey!" Nnamdi exclaimed. "You're a spirit, o!" He stepped back, thinking of how his auntie Grace often warned him about "the devil in disguise." The man's beret even had the silver elephant emblem in front. In his chest, Nnamdi felt the longing for his father like something pulling at his heart. He could even smell his father's cologne. *Run!* he thought. But he couldn't. He flexed his legs and then

relaxed. Tears came to his eyes. It had been a year, yet in this moment, the reality of his father's death washed over Nnamdi more strongly than he'd ever experienced. The moment left him breathless.

His father held up his hands and then dropped them back to his sides. He sighed. "I'm sorry I died, my son," he said.

Nnamdi's shoulders shuddered as he fought his emotions. Even with all the effort, he couldn't help starting to sniffle. His father's voice, his scent, his everything. He missed him so, so much. The words tumbled from him like overdue rain. "Mommy . . . they got Mommy," he blurted. "Last week. It was the guy they call Never Die! Mommy is . . ."

"I know."

"Mommy's had to start selling *tapioca*! And that's how . . ."

"I know," his father said more firmly.

"She curses you every day!" Tears dribbled from Nnamdi's eyes. "And . . . and I don't blame her! Why'd you have to go and get yourself . . . killed like that? Now Mommy has to struggle! No one respects her enough to protect her now. We're lucky we still have our house! The thieves will descend on us soon, Daddy! As revenge against you! You didn't finish what you started. And I can't do anything about it!"

Nnamdi took a step forward, his arms half-raised. Then he stepped back and just stood there, sobbing, his arms to his sides. No, he couldn't run into his father's arms. Not anymore.

His whole body prickled and clenched. Those days were over. His father did not move to comfort Nnamdi either. He, too, just stood there looking sad. After a few moments, Nnamdi asked, “Why are you here?”

“To give you something.”

“Give me something?” Nnamdi wiped the tears from his eyes. “Give me what? What can you possibly give me now?”

“Do you wish to protect your mother?”

“Yes.”

“And Kaleria, as a whole?”

Nnamdi frowned.

“No need to answer right now. It’s too big a question. But you will have to answer it soon enough. I can at least give you what you need, regardless.” He paused, looking hard at Nnamdi. “Hold your breath.”

Nnamdi hesitated, his auntie Grace’s warnings about devils, witches, and demons running through his mind yet again. He looked around. Still, not a car passed on the road. Not a person walked by. Even at night, this was bizarre. It was Saturday. The akara lady made most of her week’s pay on this night. Where was she? Was this the devil bringing him to a secluded place where no one could save him from being tempted to evil? But deep in his gut, he felt this *truly was* his father, not the devil trying to deceive him. And hadn’t his father always said to trust your gut? He took a deep, deep breath and held it.

“This object, this thing . . .” His father spoke softly as he knelt down and gathered what looked like a pile of dirt at his feet. “It will steal your breath if you breathe while I’m offering it. That is what I am told.” He spoke in a monotone voice, as if he were doing a ritual. He gathered and gathered the dirt into a pile and then it began to gather itself. Nnamdi’s eyes grew wide as he struggled not to breathe.

“An Ikenga,” his father said, scooping up some of the dirt. In his ghostly hands, the dirt rippled like vibrating water. “Know your deep Igbo, my son. *Ikenga* means ‘place of strength.’ From me to you, my son. To you *only*. No one else is to touch this. It is *your* responsibility. It is yours alone.” The dirt made a crackling sound as it fused itself into the shape of an ebony figure with two long spiral horns, seated on a stool grasping what looked like a machete in its bulbous right hand. In its left, which was much smaller, it carried what looked like a planet. Its face was fierce and focused ahead, as if it could see the future and it didn’t like what it saw. Every surface of the object was etched with tiny symbols, except the piercing eyes and thick, unsmiling lips. His father picked up the Ikenga and blew softly on it.

“You can breathe now,” his father said softly.

Nnamdi exhaled and then took a deep breath, filling his lungs. The smell of strong palm wine entered his nose and the sound of the blood rushing in his veins thumped in his ears. He looked at his father. “What’s an Ikenga?” he asked.

“This one is old, passed down over and over. It will guide your hand correctly if you calm yourself and focus on the tasks,” his father said.

Nnamdi shook his head to clear it. “What tasks?”

“Hold out your hand.”

Nnamdi slowly held out both of his hands.

“Not the left,” his father snapped. “Only the right. You do not take the Ikenga with any other hand but the right, your *aka ikenga*.”

Nnamdi frowned, an odd thought popping into his head: “*Any other hand*”? *Why not just say “right hand”*? *We only have two hands*. He brought down his left and slowly, his father set the Ikenga on the palm of his upturned right hand. It was warm, like something alive, and felt oddly heavy, as if it were full of water. It was larger than his hand and as solid as a ten-pound barbell. Nnamdi grunted and stumbled forward, working not to bring his left hand up to help. But even as he did this, the Ikenga was shrinking, growing lighter and lighter until it was smaller than the palm of his hand.

“There is no advice I can give you for this. I can only give it to you or not give it to you. I choose to give it to you. Chukwu only knows the rest, my son.”

Nnamdi closed his hand around the warm object, more on instinct than anything else. He was looking up at his father, suddenly feeling light-headed and a bit queasy. When he spoke, it felt like he was speaking up from the bottom of

a well with a mouth full of warm honey. His words came slowly: “But doesn’t Auntie Grace say that . . .”

Everything went black.

Then he was there again.

His father was slowly fading away.

Nnamdi tried to speak, but his throat was burning as if he’d just swallowed hot pepper soup. He fell to his knees, but his knees were burning, too. And his right hand was burning, still grasping the Ikenga. His face, arms, belly. He shut his eyes. Every part of him felt like it was in flames. Panic. Regret. *Should have stayed within the gate*, he thought. This was some evil, had to be. Only evil could feel this painful. Maybe this man was the Chief of Chiefs in some sort of crazy disguise. Maybe, like his father, Nnamdi had been shot. Was this what his father had felt as his life drained away? A whimper escaped Nnamdi’s throat as he curled into himself, trying to squeeze out the pain searing through his body.

The pain stopped. He looked at his right hand; the Ikenga was gone. Slowly, Nnamdi stood up. But the ground felt mushy . . . not there? He looked down and nearly screamed. He was floating. “What is . . . ?”

He inhaled and exhaled on the empty road. *At least I’m still alive*, he thought.

“Stop it!” a woman screamed. *Beeeeeeep!* The noise was coming from straight ahead. Up the road. In the dark. Nnamdi

frowned. Yes, it was dark, but—but he could *see*. Like he was a cat.

“Stop it! Please!” the woman screamed. “Take whatever you want; just don’t hurt me!”

Nnamdi felt a powerful combination of complete confusion and an instinct to help. The need was so strong that he was overcome with dizziness and nearly fell over. Instead, he stumbled against the wall beside him. He steadied himself, pressing a hand to the concrete. The wall was rough and grooved and . . . as he ran his hand over it, he could hear every grain of concrete and dirt on the wall rolling and crumbling beneath his palm.

“Get off me!” This time Nnamdi heard the woman so clearly that she could have been a few feet away. He heard her hand shoving against the person trying to hurt her. Then he heard a *slap!* And a male voice growl, “Get out!”

Still dizzy, Nnamdi took off toward the shouts, again following his instincts. He wildly ran along the side of the empty road, the shouts as if they were just in front of him, yet nothing appeared. He turned a corner and there, finally, he saw the car. A shiny silver Mercedes with its headlights on. The engine was still running. There were barbed logs on the road and a car stopped before them. A man and a woman were struggling at the front door.

“Ged out b’fore I break your head!” the man yelled in a slurred voice.

He pulled at the young woman's arm, but she held fast to the inside of the door. *What is . . . ?* But there was no time to process any of it. The woman was in trouble. Thinking of his mother at the mercy of a criminal like this, Nnamdi ran at the man and grabbed the collar of his shirt. *What am I doing?* Nnamdi thought with terror. *This man is going to tear me apart!* But Nnamdi yanked at the shirt anyway. *Maybe the woman will at least get away,* he thought. Even in the darkness, Nnamdi could see the drunken man's shirt was filthy, stiff with dirt, grime, and sweat. And he could smell him. Like putrid garbage and unwashed socks.

Nnamdi looked deep into his eyes: they were dreamy and unclear, like milk mixed with too much water. Nnamdi knew who this man was, as he knew all the crazies of Kaleria. This was Three Days' Journey, the dirty carjacker, who, despite his constant drunkenness, managed to steal close to a hundred cars each year. He would take the cars to Tse-Kucha, a town three days' journey away, where he would sell them for a nice price. Now, somehow, Three Days' Journey seemed to be having trouble pulling away from Nnamdi's grasp.

"Leave her alone!" Nnamdi shouted, yanking Three Days' Journey back and throwing him to the dirt. Nnamdi vaguely noticed the deep, echoing sound of his voice, but he was too focused on Three Days' Journey to wonder about it. As Nnamdi moved toward the wild man, several things dawned on him at once.

1: Three Days' Journey, a grown man of over six feet, was scrambling away from him, a twelve-year-old boy.

2: The low voice had been his own.

3: The woman behind him had shut the car door, turned the car around, and driven off.

“Please! AYYYYEE! Don’t hurt me, o!” Three Days’ Journey shouted as Nnamdi stood over him. “Whooo!” Three Days’ Journey jumped up, wobbling about. “I was just . . . please! Devil! Spirit! Whatev’r you are! Spare me, o!”

Nnamdi couldn’t believe how wildly this man was behaving. He was screeching and dancing about like a madman. *Because of me?* he wondered. “Calm down! I’m just . . .”

“*Chineke!* You don’ have to speak! Ah, ah! I’ve learned my lesson!”

Nnamdi frowned and took small step toward Three Days’ Journey, holding out a hand. “Let me help you,” he said.

“AYEEEEEE!” Three Days’ Journey screeched. Then he turned and fled into the patch of nearby bushes, his long, skinny arms in the air like a terrified orangutan.

Nnamdi stood there in the darkness. He could clearly see Three Days’ Journey shambling off through the bushes as if he were looking at him in broad daylight. The man tripped

and fell, got up, and continued running away. *How can I see that?* Nnamdi wondered. Then he remembered how strongly he'd held the man. He looked down at his hands and gasped. They were the hands of a grown man! A large man, dark-skinned. Not "dark"—*black*-skinned, as if he were stitched from the night. He touched his face and felt stubble. He gasped, pulling his hand away with horror. "My body, o! My body, o!" he cried. He twitched, hearing his low, deep voice. "What's happened to me?! Witchcraft?"

Nnamdi turned and ran home.

He ran past people strolling on the roadside. Market women returning from a late night. More people headed to his compound for the party. He looked around, breathing frantically, wondering what he must look like. Where had they been when all this was happening? Cars and trucks passed him on the street. All he heard was his own breathing, like some huge man, and the sound of his huge feet slapping the dirt. He wasn't floating high above the ground; he was just super-tall. He briefly wondered what clothes he was wearing, for surely his own clothes were too small. He didn't look down to check.

His breathing grew faster and faster, and soon he was hyperventilating. His vision rolled around him, stars of red, silver, and blue bursting before his eyes as he finally arrived at his gate. He stumbled between the parked cars. He moaned, his vision blurring. Then, right there at the gate, he passed out.

“Nnamdi!”

Someone was shoving him.

“Nnamdi! Wake up!”

He felt someone grab his shoulder and shake. He didn’t want to open his eyes, afraid of what he would see. His chest ached, his throat burned, and a stone was grinding into the small of his back.

“What happened to you?” Chioma asked, her voice heavy with concern. She shook him again. “I know you’re awake. Get up before someone *sees* you!” She grunted as she tried to pull him up. “Do you want to scare your mother?”

That reached him. Nnamdi slowly opened his eyes to see Chioma leaning over him. He sat up. “Ooh,” he grunted, the blood rushing from his head. “Do I . . .” He paused. His voice sounded normal. “Do I look okay?”

Chioma grinned, looking him over as he slowly got up. “No blood,” she said. “You have ten fingers and probably ten toes. You’re fine!”

Nnamdi chuckled despite himself. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

He was lucky to not have been run over by one of the cars. *Maybe I wasn’t out for that long*, he thought. It was dark here, but his clothes were white; well, now they were a dirty white. And, he noticed, not torn. *Maybe it was all a dream*. He felt a sinking disappointment in his gut.

“What happened?” she asked. “Did that strange man beat you for following him?” She frowned. “But you don’t seem hurt.”

“You saw him?” he asked louder than he’d wanted to.

“Yeah.”

“Clearly?”

“Barely, but yeah. It was a man, I know that. I tried following you when you were running, but it was so dark and you just took off!”

He blinked and frowned. “Yeah, I don’t know why I did that.”

She nodded. “It was kind of stupid.”

“Maybe.”

They looked at each other until Nnamdi looked away. What was he supposed to tell her? He looked at the spot where he’d fallen and froze. Slowly, he knelt down and picked it up. “Oh my God,” he whispered. The *Ikenga*. Immediately the aroma of strong palm wine descended on him. It had all really happened.

“What’s that?” Chioma asked, taking it from him before he could stop her.

“Hey! Don’t touch it!”

“Why?” She laughed, holding it up in her right hand. “Is this . . .” She brought it closer to her eyes. The smile dropped from her face as the *Ikenga*’s head seemed to twitch. She screeched, shuddered, and shoved it back into Nnamdi’s hands. “What is that? Something from your father’s bookshelf? Oh wait, maybe it’s a Nigerian action figure. Do they make those yet? Let me guess his name: Cosmic Juju Man!” She laughed.

He quickly put it in his pocket. “It’s nothing.”

Chioma looked from her hand to Nnamdi, shaking her hand as if the Ikenga had left some residue on it. “Seriously, though, what is it?” she said. “I don’t like it at all.”

Nnamdi shook his head, babbling, “No, no, it’s not . . . it’s just . . .”

“Nnamdi, Chioma. Why are you two out here?”

They both turned around.

“Uncle Innocent,” Nnamdi said, his voice too high.

“Good evening,” Chioma blurted, wiping her hand on her dress.

“Nnamdi, where is your mother?” his uncle asked in his gruff voice. Nnamdi had always thought he sounded like a lion. He’d always hoped he would grow up to have the same voice. A voice that made people stop and listen.

“She’s inside the house,” Chioma said, pointing behind them.

Uncle Inno frowned at Nnamdi. “What happened to your clothes?”

“Oh . . . I . . . uh, fell.”

Looking unsure, his uncle Inno said, “Go clean up.”

“I will, Uncle,” Nnamdi said.

As soon as Uncle Inno went inside, Chioma and Nnamdi went and sat on the bench away from the party.

“What happened to you?” Chioma asked.

“I don’t . . . know.”

“How can you not know? It was only a few minutes ago,” she pressed.

He sighed. “Chioma, please. I . . . I need to think.”

“Who was that man?”

“I . . .” He shook his head again.

She narrowed her eyes at him, then she sighed. “It’s okay. Tell me later.”

He nodded.

“You’re okay, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to go dance then. Your uncle was right—you should go change.”