DAZZLING

Chịkọdịlị
Emelụmadụ

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For my parents Drs E. C. and O. F. Emelụmadụ,
and for my ancestors: Emelụmadụ, Obiọra,
Okereke and Irugbo, and all others unknown or
forgotten. Bịanụ welụ ọjị.

The Arrival

Long Before

They knew he must have been a slave, the stranger, because he bore proof on his wrists and one ankle, his back red and raw, buzzing with flies. Nobody flogged a grown man unless he was a slave – or a criminal. A runaway, as the manacle around the right ankle testified. Or a violently mad man? The lookout had sounded the alarm and now the village lay hushed, the elderly, the children and the infirm. Runaway slaves had a way of bringing trouble with them.

The town, named 'Oba-of-the-nine-brothers' after its founders, hid, her best warriors crouching in dense bushes, watching and waiting. They were lucky, these children of the goddess Idemili, and they knew it. Collectively, they were one of the smallest villages under her dominion. The same goddess who fed them from her river, encircled them with her totem, the giant python, keeping their enemies away. Sometimes, though, they were not so lucky, and the same river allowed their enemies to draw up under the cover of night and try to steal their children away. Hence, the warriors in the bushes, and the silent eyes following every shuffling, weary step of the stranger, to see how far he would go before one of them buried a spear in his back.

Presently, he stopped and sank to his knees, unable to continue. The warriors stepped forth, wearing their leaf-and-raffia camouflage. The stranger fell on his face, speaking softly,

his breathing laboured. The boldest of them all, Ejimofo, drew forward, prodding the stranger in the back with his machete.

'I want to see the elders,' the stranger said, arms outstretched. He lay prostrate until he was sure nobody was going to take his head from his shoulders, then he finally risked raising his face. 'I want to see the elders,' he repeated.

'And who are you that you should demand anything from us?' The warriors were tense. This close, they saw that the man's eyes were clearer than they had imagined, and when he stood, the esoteric markings under his matted chest hair, which they could not see until he drew closer, caused further unease. They fell back as a group.

'What did you do, then?' Ejimofo asked, hefting his machete. It spun in the air, landing in his palm with a smack, the raffia-bound hilt crackling. 'Big man like you, in chains. You killed someone you should not have, is that it? I know your type. Drunk with power. Did you kill a white man?'

The stranger said nothing, but each of the men knew himself to be watched. The spears and machetes raised. The stranger licked his split lips. He stood stock-still so that the flies feasting on his wounds settled like anklets around his feet.

'We don't want you here. Go.' Ejimofo pointed back the way the man had come. The group hesitated. The stranger had asked for succour, after all. He had asked for the elders, as was his right. One did not turn away anyone seeking aid. And had he not come in the day, on his own two feet?

'Do you know who I am?' he asked.

Ejimofo's downturned mouth spoke his disdain. 'And who are you? We should fear to speak, eh? Because you bear markings we cannot fathom? Your sort do not speak so boldly. You hide and you whisper and plot in the darkness. How are we to know you did not do those to yourself?'

The stranger bristled. He stared at the warriors, and they

tensed, waiting for him to spring. Instead, he lowered his head. 'My sort. You think there are people like me. Here?'

'We do not know.' Another warrior spoke up. Ejimofo, eyes flashing, cut short the exchange.

'We can give you water to drink, but after that, you must go. You smell of problems. We don't want the kind of misfortune you are bringing with you.'

A gourd was brought forth and, hands shaking, the stranger took it. He drank, little sips at first, but the sweetness of the water overtook him, and he gulped it down, gagging and spluttering. He poured the rest over his head, and it trickled down his muscular body, soaking into his loincloth. He handed back the gourd. Ejimofo motioned again, pointing the way out of the village, but the stranger ignored him, sitting down on the ground. The warriors glanced warily at each other. The end of the day was approaching. Soon, the path would be full of people returning from a day in the market, or children going on errands or playing before night fell. They did not want the stranger's presence known. They had no wish to cause a panic.

'Get him up,' said Ejimofo. With the flat of his machete, he slapped the stranger's broad, broken back, which rippled threateningly even though the man did not move. The smack set off their hysteria, and, as one, the warriors fell on the man and beat him. When they dragged him off into the forest sometime later, the earth was disturbed, bloody and scattered. They left the youngest warrior in charge of sweeping it over with a branch from a palm tree, and hauled their prisoner into the hut used for manhood initiations and rites. They left him there while spies were dispatched to the surrounding areas, to see if the stranger had come alone or if he had brought company with him. They argued into the night about what to do with him, and took turns guarding him while they decided whether or not they would tell the elders of his arrival.

It was not the done thing to beat a stranger and keep him locked up, but Ejimofo was in charge – and had he not taken the most human heads during wars? Nobody dared defy him.

Until somebody did.

The youngest warrior was on watch that night, away from his new wife's bed. It was he who, feeling in his heart the wrongness of what they had done, ran on swift feet to call Isi Idemili, the goddess's priest. Together, they bore the stranger up from the cold mud floor of the hut and spirited him away to the shrine, where he could be treated with herbs and potions, chants and prayers, the priest begging forgiveness from the Mother Idemili for the breaking of the laws of hospitality.

By the time the warriors noticed his absence and traced him to the shrine, the stranger was on his feet, healing impossibly fast, even for what he was. Ejimofo's eyes burned, but the stranger was now under the priest's protection. Ejimofo stood at the threshold to the shrine, staring into the dim hut at the man whose wide chest filled and emptied as he breathed life-giving air.

Ejimofo spat. 'Oru!' he hissed. An enslaved man. And one with strange, unreadable markings. Who knew to what type of clandestine sect he belonged? Ejimofo could do nothing more than spit. Idemili was their mother, and the stranger, through her priest, had anchored himself to her waters.

'Do not shoot your saliva in this house before water drowns you where you stand,' Isi Idemili warned. 'What is a fly but a spot on the buttocks of an elephant?'

Ejimofo brushed past the young warrior on his way out, murder in his gaze, but the boy was freeborn, from a long line of titled men, already wealthy with land and blessed with yams. He feared only the gods' displeasure.

'I will bring you to the elders when you are properly recovered,' the young warrior told the stranger. 'I should have

said something earlier. There will be a fine for breaking the laws of the land – may Ani forgive us all.'

The stranger stood. 'I am Nwokereke; many call me Idimogu,' he said with pride. 'When it is your turn to fight, I will stand with you.'

In the trees above, a hornbill trilled suddenly and took to the skies, broad wings blotting out the sun.

CHAPTER ONE

Ozoemena: Then

On the day Ozoemena's uncle Odiogo died, she developed an itch in the middle of her back that no amount of scratching could ease. She did not tell anyone. Ozoemena, at eight, was a girl who had learned to read a room and provide exactly what it needed; and in that moment, the room needed her silence. Her uncle had just been delivered to their house, shot multiple times by armed robbers.

The building filled with panicking and the heavy metal scent of blood. Her mother scurried this way and that, from the medical storeroom-cum-laundry room in the two topmost flats they shared as a family, pulling packets of needles and scalpels and bags of intravenous fluids off the shelves. She handed them to auxiliary nurses, who raced downstairs to the ground floor of the four-storey building, where her father's theatre was located behind swinging double doors. There was no wailing – that would come later. So Ozoemena sat and tried to scratch at the itch on her back, just beyond the reach of her fingers. Her sister, Mbu, smacked the reaching hand away, watching their mother pace, torn between being with her daughters and going downstairs, where she would certainly be in the way of the surgical team. Mbu cradled their sleeping baby sister on her lap, making a spiky sort of nest from her gangly twelve-year-old limbs and a cushion.

'Stop scratching,' Mbu said. 'I don't like how it's doing my ear.'

Mbu was sensitive to sounds, and found many irritating. Ozoemena stopped, but only for a moment. The itch seemed like a concentration of heat rashes without the soothing cool of mentholated dusting powder. She rubbed against the knitted antimacassar on the back of the settee, its knotty cobweb design bringing relief.

'Stop scratching,' Mbu repeated, her voice harder. It had been growing steadily so since they returned to Nigeria from the UK four years ago – a time Ozoemena could no longer fully remember nor appreciate. Mbu yearned to go back, Ozoemena to go forward. They remained at an impasse.

Baby, the baby, stirred on the cushion and Mbu patted her back absentmindedly. Their mother took the baby and sent them off across the landing to bed.

It would be morning before they discovered their uncle had died on their father's operating table before the first IV bag could begin its job. Ozoemena's nails were reddish crescents from scratching in her sleep. Her morning bath was hellish, and she cried, both for herself and her uncle, and the change she sensed but could not name. For the unmaking of her father, withered to a whimpering boy before her very eyes by the absence of his closest sibling. They did not go to school that day.

A few days later, they made the hour-long trip to their grandfather's house in Oba. For Odiogo's funeral, they wore an indigo wax print. It was the closest thing to black that was not. This was not Ozoemena's first funeral. At five, her best friend, Nnenna, had died from complications arising from sickle cell anaemia. A whisper-death, six other siblings having died the same way. Ozoemena had stood at the open graveside with her classmates, schoolmates and teachers, watching Nnenna's wailing mother, imagining all eyes on her, expecting

something that she could not make happen. In the end, she had looked up into the harsh sun overhead, blinding herself to the sight of all those eyes. The tears had fallen, and people had made the right noises, patting her head and shoulders, even though what Ozoemena felt was bewilderment. Her father had tried to save Nnenna too, half-dead when they brought her into hospital, a greenish fluid leaking from her mouth. The family, it seemed, had dallied with herbal remedies first, until it was too late.

Her uncle's grave was wide and red, a hungry maw that swallowed the coffin whole and had no more room for the soil that came after. Its stomach distended high above the ground of her grandfather's compound. The old man did not attend and neither did her grandmother – it was anathema for parents to outlive their children. The night before, during the wake, her grandmother, M'ma, had sat in her bedroom, receiving visitors silently and shovelling utaba into her nostrils with one blunt thumbnail. The women of the village had kept her company, comforted her, held her when she could no longer bear the pain of her loss, and mourned for her when her voice failed. Their ululation had carried into the night, spattering anyone who heard it with chills. Ozoemena had wandered amongst the canopies arranged in her grandfather's compound, playing games with her many cousins. When she tired, she had sat on a frigid metal chair and eavesdropped on conversations – easy to do in a place where nobody regarded children as people, until they grew up and proved their worth. The gospel band had played songs of heavenly consolation, the loudspeakers had blasted, and the generator carrying the fluorescent lights rumbled somewhere in the backyard, belching smoke. And then there was morning, and right now.

'Mbu? What's a hard death?' she asked her sister. The jollof rice was hot. Too hot. It made the plastic plate soft and malleable, like chewing gum.

'Where did you hear that?' Mbu's voice sharpened, and Ozoemena knew she held her sister's attention in a bad way.

'I just heard someone say it. What does it mean?'

Mbu scowled, her small eyes narrowing even further. 'Don't let Daddy hear you say that.' She walked away to join the big girls serving food, her Ventolin inhaler forming a small tent in the pocket of her dress. Ozoemena accepted that she should not ask again. One of her father's sisters, Aunty Edna, passed her, carrying the baby, who reached out salivary fingers, recognising her big sister. Ozoemena waggled her hand at the baby in return and headed off by herself towards the animal enclosures belonging to her grandfather.

The boy stood there, at the goat pen. At first, she wanted to turn around and wander off again, but she cleared her throat. The compound belonged to her grandfather, after all.

'Excuse me? You're not supposed to be here.' She did not know if this was true – after all, the boy could be a distant relation, as welcome as she was – but it felt true. Her grandmother's ewes nestled on some hay, their young shying away from the boy's outstretched hands. In the area next to the goats, the chickens darted around, pecking at pawpaw leaves tied to the posts to discourage them from pecking each other to death. The boy did not turn.

The pens were made from dried mud and wooden posts. The zinc roofing crackled in the sun.

'Excuse me?' she said again, embarrassment in her voice. Her mother drilled good manners into her, into Mbu. Ozoemena still often found herself on the wrong footing with her classmates, found them to be rude and unresponsive to her questions, which they deemed obvious. They mocked her lack of knowledge of certain games. They made fun of her snacks and accent, long after she lost it. She never knew what to do in the presence of rudeness except be ashamed, blame herself.

Ozoemena crossed her arms. 'I'm going to call someone, since you won't listen. If M'ma catches you there, you'll know yourself.'

She turned away, walked past the covered pit latrine on her left, radiating heat, and headed towards the back of her grandmother's kitchen, cluttered with tools of the woman's trade: hoes and machetes and empty jute bags, wooden carriers with chicken wire made for ferrying chicks. Everything was covered in red earth or caked with rich black loam. Through the slit in the back of the kitchen wall, Ozoemena saw a wire basket of dried fish suspended from the sooty beam over the spot where her grandmother lit the wood fire for cooking, blackened ears of corn keeping it company.

The back of the kitchen was to her left; the pebbled concrete cubicle that served as the bathroom for the compound was straight ahead and to the right. The steps that led up to the cubicle were broken, and moss grew in the cracks. The ground remained wet. The big tree shielding bathers from the sun was fruitless, having gulped its share of bathwater and soap. Ozoemena meant to round the bend to the left, to call the attention of the women stirring tripod iron pots outside the kitchen, talking, instructions and orders flying. She saw the smoke coming from their cooking. She saw the dog she meant to avoid, a bitch named Chuzzy, who got meaner each time she pupped, and her litter was seized and sold. But she felt something the moment the dog's ears pricked up.

It was what told her the boy was behind her.

Chuzzy rose, growling, and Ozoemena turned around, her eyes level with a black mark on the boy's chest. Too slow. The boy placed a hand around her back, on the itch clustered there, and it exploded into heat and pain. Ozoemena's mouth widened to form a scream, and Chuzzy went insane, pulling on her chain, which was tied around a metal stake driven into the ground. Saliva dribbled from her fangs.

Ozoemena thought she was screaming, but she was not. All she felt was pain, in her head, in her veins, shrieking, a salted-snail shriek. Eventually, the women would stop throwing scraps to appease Chuzzy and come and check what she was barking at. They would see Ozoemena crumpled on the floor, her funeral blouse torn open at the back and the beginnings of a welt on her skin; they would shout, and M'ma, her grandmother, would spring to her feet and leave her room, alerted by cries that contained more alarm than sorrow, and follow them. M'ma would take one look at her granddaughter's weeping back and laugh and cry, and the women would wonder if she had already lost her mind from grief, because they had never seen her act with such ambiguity, but they would do as she said and lift the granddaughter up, and fetch the girl's father from the front of the compound, where he received guests under his special canopy and allowed himself to be consoled by old friends and classmates of him and his brother – the Inseparable Duo, so named by people who did not realise the brothers were bound by more than just blood. And Ozoemena's father would come and look and go in silence, such grim silence that nobody recalled him speaking afterwards, not even to accept heartfelt words from the delegation of priests whom he always treated in his hospital for free. His wife would ask him what was wrong, and he would say nothing to her.

In that moment, though, Ozoemena's body shrieked in pain, and the bitch Chuzzy rattled her chains as she leaped and jumped, her empty flattened teats swinging like bunting, and the strange boy leaned over and whispered in her ear, his breath a cooling breeze: I am sorry.