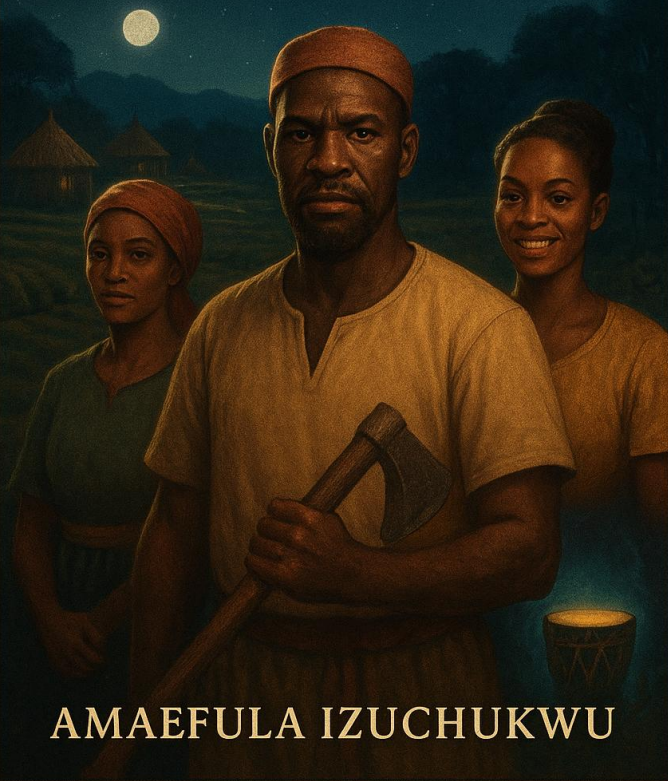


THE FARMER'S LEGACY

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



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The Farmer’s Legacy: The Tale of Two Wives

By Amaefula Izuchukwu

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Novel Title: The Farmer's Two Wives

Synopsis

In a quiet farming village, lived Obinna, a farmer who took two wives—Adaeze, the dutiful and traditional woman, and Nneoma, the younger wife with modern ideas. While the community expected them to live under the same roof and follow the customs of shared womanhood, the two women chose a different path. Each wife demanded her own house, her own farm, and her own life with the man they both loved.

This decision shook the village. Elders whispered that Obinna had broken tradition, neighbours mocked his household, and the children bore the weight of divided loyalty. Yet beneath the struggle lay a question: **must love and marriage always bow to tradition, or could they redefine family and community?**

The Farmer's Two Wives

Chapter One

– The Farmer's Household

The cock crowed three times before dawn, its shrill call slicing through the stillness of the village. The sound carried across the clay compounds, drifting into the raffia-thatched huts, waking farmers, hunters, and children alike.

In Umuaka village, mornings were sacred. Smoke already curled from distant kitchens, carrying the smell of smoldering firewood. Somewhere, a woman sang an old folk tune, soft and steady, while grinding maize on a stone slab.

Obinna, the farmer, was already awake. His body, tall and broad like the iroko tree, bent slightly with the weight of years spent tilling the stubborn soil. His hands were calloused, his feet hardened from walking barefoot across ridges and furrows. Yet in his eyes burned the quiet fire of a man who owned his land, his goats, his barns, and his household.

But it was his household that set tongues wagging in the village.

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For Obinna had two wives.

Adaeze, the first, was a woman of calm dignity. Her skin glowed like polished wood, her voice was gentle but firm, and her ways reflected the teachings of the elders. She cooked the old recipes, rose before dawn, and spoke rarely unless her words carried weight.

Nneoma, the second wife, was different. Young, vibrant, and sharp-tongued, she laughed loudly, wore her wrapper boldly, and often questioned traditions that others dared not. She was the kind of woman who could turn a market quarrel into a battle and still return home victorious.

The two women lived under one roof—a large mud house with separate huts inside the compound. At least, that was what the community expected of a farmer of Obinna's standing. But harmony was a fragile bird, and in Obinna's home, its wings had begun to falter.

This morning, as Obinna tied his goat rope to the post, a voice rang out from inside the compound.

"Obinna!" It was Nneoma. "Tell your first wife to keep her hands away from my basket of cocoyams. She is always acting like the entire farm belongs to her!"

From the other side, Adaeze emerged, her wrapper neatly tied, her face serene but her voice steady.

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"Nneoma, if you spent more time on the farm and less time gossiping at the stream, you would not accuse me of touching what is not mine."

Obinna sighed. The day had only just begun, yet the storm was already gathering.

The farmer turned to face them, his deep voice rolling like thunder.

"Enough! Both of you. The sun has not even risen fully, and already my ears are full. If the soil could listen to such quarrels, it would refuse to yield crops."

Adaeze lowered her gaze, but Nneoma folded her arms, her eyes flashing.

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the bleating of goats and the crackle of firewood from the kitchen hut. Obinna looked from one wife to the other, and a thought formed in his mind—one that would change not just his household, but the entire village.

That thought was simple: *Perhaps it was time they no longer lived as one household.*

Chapter Two

– Adaeze and Nneoma

The morning quarrel did not die easily. It lingered in the air like the smoke of palm-kernel fires, creeping into every corner of the compound. Even as Obinna hoisted his hoe onto his shoulder and led his sons to the farm, his mind was heavy. Behind him, the wives remained, each guarding her pride like a warrior sharpening a blade.

Adaeze moved to the cooking hut, her steps measured. She knelt before the hearth, arranging sticks of firewood with the patience of one who knew that anger was a fire that burned the heart first. As the flames licked the pot, she hummed an ancient lullaby, steadying her spirit.

Her eldest daughter, Ifunanya, watched her.

“Mama,” the girl whispered, “why do you and Mama Nneoma always fight?”

Adaeze paused, her wooden spoon hovering over the pot. She glanced at her daughter, whose wide eyes held both innocence and worry.

“My child,” Adaeze said softly, “two hens cannot drink from one calabash without splashing each other. That is

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the way of polygamy. But remember this—patience keeps the heart clean.”

Ifunanya nodded, though her young mind did not yet grasp the depth of her mother's words.

Across the yard, Nneoma was not singing. She was pacing, her wrapper tied tightly around her waist, her lips moving with irritation. Two of the younger wives of other farmers had come to sit with her, their laughter rising and falling like restless birds.

“That Adaeze thinks she is queen,” Nneoma hissed. “Because she is first wife, she believes the farm belongs to her. But let her try me—let her try me, and she will see that youth carries its own fire.”

Her friends laughed, nodding eagerly. One of them whispered, “You should tell Obinna to build you your own compound. Why live like this, when you can be mistress of your own home?”

The thought stirred something deep in Nneoma. It was a seed she had watered in secret—a dream of her own hut, her own kitchen, her own farm, where no one would watch her or claim authority over her life.

When Obinna returned from the farm that evening, sweat glistening on his forehead, the tension in the compound was as thick as unripe yam. He sat on the

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wooden stool beneath the udala tree, wiping his brow, while both wives lingered nearby, waiting for his attention.

Adaeze spoke first, her voice calm but edged with quiet resolve.

“Husband, this house is no longer peaceful. I have endured, but each day the quarrels grow. A man cannot plant cassava in soil where weeds choke his efforts. I ask you, find a way for peace to return to this home.”

Nneoma stepped forward, her arms folded, her chin lifted.

“Yes, husband. She speaks truth, but let me tell you the real solution. Give me my own hut—my own compound—so that I may cook my meals, tend my farm, and live without quarrels. I am not a child to be hidden under another woman’s shadow.”

The words fell like stones into Obinna’s heart. His eyes shifted from Adaeze’s composed face to Nneoma’s burning gaze. For a long moment, the night swallowed his silence.

Then, slowly, Obinna spoke.

“What you both ask...” he said, his voice heavy, “is against the way of our people. Wives of one man live together. They share, they endure, and the community

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sees them as one household. To separate you is to scatter tradition itself.”

Adaeze lowered her eyes, but Nneoma took a step closer.

“Tradition does not put food in my pot, Obinna. Tradition does not stop quarrels. Let us live differently, and maybe we will find peace.”

The farmer rubbed his beard, his heart torn. He knew that whatever choice he made would not only shape his household, but also shake the very foundation of how the community saw him.

That night, as the moon climbed above the tall palms, Obinna lay awake. Beside him, Adaeze slept quietly. From the other hut, he could hear Nneoma's restless footsteps.

And in that silence, the decision began to take root—dangerous, heavy, and certain.

Chapter Three

– The Decision

The morning sun rose slowly, staining the sky with shades of orange and gold. The village of Umuaka came alive: women balanced calabashes on their heads as they hurried to the stream, children chased each other barefoot across dusty paths, and men shouldered their hoes, heading to the farms.

But in Obinna's compound, the day began with a silence that felt heavier than the chatter of birds.

Obinna sat beneath the udala tree, staring at the earth. His hoe leaned against the tree trunk, untouched. His thoughts wandered back and forth like a restless goat tied to a short rope. Around him, the goats bleated, hens scratched the soil, but his heart was not at ease.

Adaeze approached with a calabash of water, her face calm but her eyes clouded with worry.

"Husband," she said, kneeling before him, "it is not good for a man to carry sorrow in silence. Speak, so that we may share your burden."

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Obinna looked at her. Adaeze had been with him the longest. She had stood beside him when his barns were empty, when drought nearly ruined them, when his first harvests brought little joy. She had carried his children, nursed him through fevers, and knew the rhythm of his breath. She was tradition itself, woven into his life.

But then came Nneoma.

The younger wife emerged from her hut now, her steps quick, her wrapper tied boldly across her chest. Unlike Adaeze, she did not kneel. She stood tall, her eyes bright with fire.

"Husband," she began, "I will not live another moon like this. Every day is quarrel, every night is bitterness. I want my own hut. Build it for me on the other side of the compound—or by the road if you wish—but give me my freedom. Let me live without the shadow of another woman."

Her words cut through the air like a machete.

Adaeze turned to her, her voice low but steady.

"Nneoma, the goat that strays too far from the herd is the first to meet the leopard. Do you not know that a woman without her fellow wives is like a palm fruit cut from the bunch?"

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Nneoma's lips curled in defiance.

"And what has being in a bunch brought me, Adaeze? Suspicion? Quarrels? Whispered insults? If you enjoy this life, stay. But I will not."

The two women faced each other, like two rivers that refused to merge.

Obinna raised his hand.

"Enough!" His voice thundered, and even the goats stopped bleating for a moment. He stood, his tall frame casting a shadow on both wives. "Last night, I thought long and deep. You are both right in your own way. To live together has brought nothing but strife. To separate you is against the way of our fathers. Yet I cannot continue like this, for a divided house cannot yield peace."

He paused, looking toward the distant hills, then back at his wives.

"So here is my decision. I will build another hut within this land. Adaeze will keep the old house; Nneoma will have the new one. Each woman will have her own kitchen, her own space, her own fields to tend. But hear me well—though your huts may be separate, you remain one household. You are still the wives of one man, and you will respect that bond."

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The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the cry of a child chasing a chicken nearby.

Adaeze lowered her gaze. Though she did not approve, she was a woman of peace. If this was her husband's will, she would endure it.

Nneoma, however, smiled faintly, satisfaction glinting in her eyes. She had won the battle she had long prayed for.

But outside Obinna's compound, the winds of rumor had already begun to stir.

That evening, when Obinna went to the stream to wash, an elder stopped him.

"Obinna," the old man said, shaking his grey head, "we hear whispers that you want to scatter your wives into two households. Do you think you are wiser than our forefathers?"

Others soon joined, murmuring their disapproval.

"Such a thing has never been done," one man spat.

"A man's wives must eat from the same pot!" another cried.

"You will bring shame on our village," a woman hissed, shaking her head.

Obinna said nothing. He merely washed his hands in silence, though his heart pounded. For he knew the

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decision he had made for peace at home would soon grow into a storm that might consume his place in the community.

And as the moon rose that night, casting pale light over his compound, Obinna realized that his household was no longer just his private affair. It had become the concern of the entire village.

Chapter Four

– The Council of Elders

The council square of Umuaka sat beneath the shade of an ancient iroko tree, its roots thick and gnarled like the arms of the ancestors themselves. It was here that men gathered to drink palm wine, settle disputes, and uphold the customs that bound the people together.

On this particular morning, Obinna was summoned. Word of his decision to divide his household had spread like dry harmattan fire, carried on the tongues of women at the stream, traders in the market, and men resting after farm work. By the time it reached the elders, it was no longer a rumor—it was a scandal.

Obinna arrived with a calm face, though his heart beat heavily inside his chest. The elders were already seated on carved wooden stools, their wrappers tied neatly, their walking sticks resting beside them. At the center sat Ichie Maduka, the oldest among them, his beard white as the egret's feathers.

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“Obinna,” Ichie Maduka began, his voice deep and slow, “you are called here not as an offender, but as a son of this land whose steps seem to wander from the footprints of our fathers.”

A murmur of agreement rippled through the council.

Another elder, Ichie Okeke, leaned forward. “It has reached our ears that you plan to separate your wives into different compounds. Is this true?”

Obinna cleared his throat. “It is true, elders. I do not deny it. My home has known no peace since my second wife came. Every day is quarrel. Every night is bitterness. I sought a solution, and this was the only one my heart could accept. Each woman will have her space, but they remain my wives.”

A sharp intake of breath swept the gathering. Ichie Nwosu, known for his fiery temper, struck his walking stick against the earth.

“Abomination! Since the time of our ancestors, wives of one man have lived together, eaten from the same pot, raised their children as one family. What you plan is not marriage—it is division!”

Another elder spoke more softly, but his words were no less piercing.

“Obinna, do you not know that a man's household is the

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mirror of the community? If you scatter your wives, you scatter our tradition. Tomorrow, another man will do the same, and soon our ways will crumble like a roof eaten by termites.”

Voices rose in agreement. “True! True!”

But Obinna lifted his hand and spoke with measured strength.

“Elders, I respect our customs. But tell me, what is the worth of tradition if it cannot bring peace? Should I sacrifice harmony in my home simply because it has not been done before? My wives are like oil and water—they cannot mix. Must I force them to? Would that not bring greater shame?”

His words silenced the gathering for a moment. The elders exchanged glances, their faces torn between anger and contemplation.

Ichie Maduka, the oldest, stroked his beard and spoke at last.

“You are bold, Obinna. Too bold. Our ways are not playthings to be bent at will. But we are also not blind. We see the quarrels that rise in polygamous homes. Still, the path you choose is dangerous. If we allow this, others will follow. Where then will our customs stand?”

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Obinna bowed his head. "I seek only peace, Ichie. If my choice is a crime, then I accept your judgment. But I will not return to a house where every day is war."

The council fell into deep murmurs. Some nodded in agreement, others shook their heads in disapproval. Finally, Ichie Maduka raised his hand for silence.

"Obinna," he declared, "we will not forbid you. But know this—your decision will not be seen as the way of Umuaka. You walk a path of your own making, and the eyes of the village will watch closely. If your house falls, let no man say it is the fault of tradition. Let it be said it is the fault of Obinna."

The words settled like heavy stones in the square. Obinna bowed again, then turned and walked away, his shadow long on the dusty ground. Behind him, the elders shook their heads, muttering among themselves.

And as he returned to his compound, Obinna felt the weight of many eyes upon him. Children whispered as he passed. Women at the stream pointed and laughed. Men at the palm-wine shed shook their heads.

He had won the right to live as he wished. But in doing so, he had placed himself against the current of the entire community.

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And in Umuaka, a man who walked against the current risked being swept away.

Chapter Five

– The Seeds of Division

The first blows of the hammer against fresh wood echoed across Obinna's compound. Young men from the village, hired with palm wine and promises of goat meat, worked under the farmer's direction to raise the frame of a new hut.

To some, it was just another building. But to the people of Umuaka, it was the crack of thunder before a storm. For each strike of the hammer was a reminder that Obinna had chosen to walk a road no man had dared before him.

Children gathered at the compound fence, their wide eyes watching the construction. Women passing to the stream paused to gossip in low voices. Some shook their heads in pity; others smirked in ridicule.

"Eh, you see it? Obinna is scattering his home."

"Hmph! A man with two wives should have wisdom, not madness."

"Mark my words, one day his children will fight each other like rival goats."

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The whispers carried. By evening, the entire market was buzzing.

Inside the old hut, Adaeze sat grinding melon seeds with steady strokes of her stone. Her face was calm, but her heart throbbed with unease. Ifunanya, her daughter, hovered nearby, her little hands trying to help pick stray seeds from the mat.

"Mama," Ifunanya whispered, "will we still live together with Mama Nneoma when the new hut is built?"

Adaeze paused. The grinding stone stilled. She stared at her daughter's innocent eyes and forced a small smile. "We will still be family, my child. But the calabash will now have two covers."

Ifunanya nodded slowly, though she did not understand.

Across the compound, Nneoma hummed cheerfully as she pounded yam, her wrapper tied high, her movements quick and vibrant. She was like a bird set free from a cage. From time to time, she peeked through the doorway to watch the young men raise her new hut.

Her friend Ngozi, who had come to visit, laughed as she fanned the fire.

"Nneoma, you have done what no woman has done

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before. Soon you will be queen of your own house. Adaeze will no longer lord over you.”

Nneoma's laughter rang like a bell. “Let her stay with her old ways. I will live in peace, without her sour face darkening my mornings.”

But though Nneoma laughed, she noticed something in the eyes of the villagers who passed her. It was not admiration. It was judgment.

Obinna, meanwhile, carried the heaviest burden. In the market, men who once drank palm wine with him now lowered their voices when he approached. At the stream, women who once greeted him warmly now muttered and turned away. Even his brothers avoided his compound, fearing the stain of his decision.

One evening, as he sat beneath the udala tree, his eldest son Chukwudi approached. The boy was nearly a man, strong from farm work but troubled in his eyes.

“Papa,” Chukwudi began, hesitating, “in the village square today, boys mocked me. They said my father has two wives but two homes, that our family is broken. I fought them, but...” His voice trailed off.

Obinna's chest tightened. He reached for his son's shoulder.

“My son, remember this: a man must sometimes stand

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alone to keep peace in his house. Do not let their words break you. One day, they will see the wisdom in what I do.”

But even as he spoke, doubt gnawed at him. Was peace truly growing in his home, or had he only planted the seeds of a deeper division?

That night, as the moon glowed over the half-built hut, the two wives lay in separate beds—one uneasy, one content.

And the village of Umuaka, restless with gossip, waited to see if the farmer's strange choice would yield harvest... or ruin.

Chapter Six

– Love and Rivalry

When the new hut was finally complete, the compound no longer felt like one home. It was as though a line had been drawn through the soil, dividing laughter, quarrels, and loyalties into two separate camps.

Adaeze remained in the old hut, where the hearth fire burned steady and calm, its smoke rising with the patience of tradition. Nneoma, radiant with victory, moved into the new hut, sweeping the floor with pride as though she were a queen establishing her own kingdom.

At first, Obinna felt relief. There were fewer quarrels at dawn, no more shouting that woke the neighbors. Each wife tended her own farm plot, cooked her own meals, and managed her children as she wished. For a while, peace seemed possible.

But peace in a divided house is like yam without oil—dry, unsatisfying, and difficult to swallow.

The Balance of Affection

Every evening, Obinna faced the burden of choice. Would he eat from Adaeze's pot of steaming bitterleaf soup, carefully stirred with love and patience? Or would he dine at Nneoma's hearth, where pepper soup and roasted plantain carried the spice of youth and energy?

If he lingered too long at one hearth, the other hearth grew cold with resentment. If he laughed too much with one wife, the other's silence grew heavy as stone.

One night, after eating with Adaeze, Obinna crossed the yard to Nneoma's hut. The moonlight guided his steps, but his heart was uneasy.

Nneoma sat outside, plaiting her hair. She did not smile when she saw him.

"So," she said sharply, "you are only now remembering that I exist? Your feet spend more time in Adaeze's hut than in mine. Perhaps you wish to make her the only wife."

Obinna sighed, sinking onto the stool beside her.

"Nneoma, must every step I take be measured like a trader counting cowries? I am one man with two hearts to tend. Have mercy on me."

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Nneoma's lips trembled, torn between anger and affection. She turned away, muttering, "A man should not plant two farms if he cannot water both."

The Silent Rivalry

Adaeze, for her part, said little. But her silence spoke volumes. When Obinna entered her hut, she welcomed him with food and warmth, yet her eyes sometimes clouded with unspoken questions.

One evening, she placed a bowl of pounded yam before him.

"Husband," she said softly, "I do not ask where you eat or where you sleep. But remember that children watch more than they listen. If you show one side more favor, the others will grow bitter."

Her words stung Obinna, not because they were harsh, but because they were true.

The Children Divided

The children, once playful together, began to mirror their mothers. Ifunanya clung to Adaeze's side, refusing to fetch water with Nneoma's daughter, Onyinye. Chukwudi, though older, grew restless, caught between

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protecting his siblings and enduring the taunts of boys in the village.

At the stream, other children mocked them.

"Which side are you from—Adaeze's or Nneoma's?"

"Your father has two homes! Is that even a family?"

The laughter stung. Onyinye returned home in tears one afternoon, sobbing into Nneoma's lap.

"Mama, they say we are not one family. They laugh at me."

Nneoma's eyes burned with fury. She stormed across the compound, shouting, "Obinna! Do you hear what your stubbornness has caused? Even our children are mocked! Is this the peace you promised us?"

Obinna stood, weary from a day's work in the farm, his hoe still in his hands. He looked at her, then at Adaeze, who stood silently by her doorway. For the first time, he felt not like the master of his household, but like a man trapped in a snare he had set with his own hands.

That night, as rain pounded the rooftops and thunder rolled across the skies, Obinna lay awake. Between Adaeze's calm silence and Nneoma's fiery demands, he realized that though the quarrels had lessened, rivalry had only grown deeper.

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And he asked himself the question he feared most:
Had he truly solved the problem of his home, or had he
merely painted peace over cracks that were widening
every day?

Chapter Seven

– The Harvest Festival

The new yam season was the heartbeat of Umuaka village. Every year, when the first harvest came, the community set aside quarrels, debts, and rivalries to dance, feast, and give thanks to the gods of the soil. Drums rolled, flutes sang, and masquerades swept the square with colors and mystery. It was the day when even the poorest man felt rich, for the earth itself had given its bounty.

This year, however, Obinna's household carried its storm into the festival grounds.

The Procession

On the morning of the festival, the women of each household dressed their families in their finest wrappers. Adaeze dressed her children in white, simple but neat, their hair braided carefully, their wrappers tied with dignity. Nneoma, on the other hand, chose bright colors—reds and yellows that caught the eye, with beads that jingled as her daughters moved.

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The two wives prepared separate baskets of roasted yam, palm oil, and kola nuts. And though Obinna had begged them to appear together, each insisted on walking with her own children, her own basket.

So it was that when Obinna entered the village square, he had Adaeze and her children walking on his left, Nneoma and hers on his right. Two households under one man.

The sight did not go unnoticed.

"Ah-ah, look at Obinna," whispered a woman at the edge of the crowd.

"He truly has scattered his house."

"Two wives, two baskets—what is this shame?"

"Tradition has ended in his compound."

The whispers grew, feeding like ants on sugar.

The Dance of Division

When the drummers called for families to dance, Obinna rose, hoping to lead his wives in a single graceful step before the crowd. But as he stretched his hand toward Adaeze, Nneoma folded her arms, refusing to join.

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"I will not dance beside her," Nneoma hissed under her breath. "Let each of us dance with our children."

Adaeze, though silent, also did not move. Her eyes lowered, her pride shielding her from humiliation.

And so, before the watching crowd, Obinna was forced to dance with his children while Adaeze's group and Nneoma's group stood apart, refusing to unite.

The drums beat loud, but the shame in the air was louder. Some laughed openly, others shook their heads. Ichie Nwosu, one of the elders, leaned toward Ichie Maduka and muttered, "We warned him. Now see what he has planted."

The Mask of Joy

After the dance, families laid their yam offerings before the shrine. Each wife of a man was expected to kneel together, side by side, presenting the harvest as one. But Adaeze and Nneoma knelt separately, each guarding her basket.

The priest frowned. "Two baskets from one man? Are we to believe Obinna is two husbands?"

Laughter rippled through the square. Children pointed, women covered their mouths to hide their giggles.

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Obinna's chest burned with shame. He forced a smile, pretending not to hear, but inside, he felt the sting of ridicule pierce deeper than any knife.

The Breaking Point

That evening, when they returned to the compound, Obinna's anger boiled over. He slammed his staff against the ground, his voice shaking the air.

"Have you seen what you have done? Before the whole village, we became a joke! They laughed at me as though I were a fool with two heads. Is this the peace I built this new hut for? Is this the life you wished for?"

Nneoma fired back, her eyes blazing.

"Do not blame me, Obinna! I told you I would not kneel beside Adaeze. If you wanted unity, you should have chosen one wife instead of two!"

Adaeze's voice was quiet, but heavy with sadness.

"Husband, do not shout. The yam will not cook faster because the fire is hot. But know this—the shame we bore today is not only yours. It is ours as well. And it is the children who will carry it the longest."

Her words hung in the air like smoke, refusing to clear.

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That night, the compound was silent, but the silence was not peace. It was the silence of a storm gathering strength.

Chapter Eight

– Trials of the Farmer

The harmattan winds came earlier than expected that year. By mid-season, the earth cracked under the sun, the streams shrank into muddy trickles, and the once-green leaves curled into brittle whispers. The village of Umuaka knew hunger was near.

Obinna felt the weight more than most. His farm stretched wide, but divided loyalties made it weak. Adaeze tilled her section with patient hands, waking before dawn to weed and water. Nneoma, proud of her independence, worked hers too, but often quarreled with laborers or abandoned the fields to argue at the stream.

Without unity, the farm yielded less than it could. And in drought, every seed mattered.

The Withering Crops

One afternoon, Obinna stood at the edge of his yam mounds. The once-flourishing leaves drooped, their

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veins dry. His sons, hoes in hand, worked tirelessly, but the soil refused to yield moisture.

"Papa," Chukwudi said, wiping sweat from his brow, "if the rains do not come, even our barns will be empty."

Obinna pressed his lips together. "A farmer does not look at the sky with despair. He works with what the earth gives." But his voice lacked its usual strength.

From across the ridge, he saw Adaeze bending low, carefully shading young shoots with dry palm fronds. Her quiet resilience touched him. Further off, Nneoma shouted at two young boys she had hired, accusing them of laziness. Her voice carried across the dry air like a whip.

Obinna's chest tightened. He had two wives, two farms, two methods—but only one famine coming.

The Call for Unity

That evening, Obinna gathered his household under the udala tree. The goats bleated restlessly, sensing the tension in the air.

"My wives, my children," Obinna began, "these are not days for quarrel. The soil is dry, the streams are shrinking. If we do not work as one, hunger will break

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us. Let us pool our harvests, share our strength, and fight this drought together.”

Adaeze nodded slowly. “It is wise, husband. When broomsticks stay together, they cannot be broken.”

But Nneoma shook her head sharply.

“Share? After I have sweated on my farm alone? No. Let Adaeze eat her own, and I will eat mine. Did you not build us separate huts so that we may live separate lives? Then let our food also be separate.”

Her words cut through the air. Adaeze bowed her head, but said nothing.

Obinna’s heart sank. His effort to save his home was sinking into deeper division.

The Hunger Days

As moons passed, the drought worsened. Yams shrank in the soil. Palm fruits dried before ripening. Goats grew lean, their ribs sharp under their skins.

Obinna worked from dawn till dusk, but his barns filled too slowly. The laughter of children in his compound grew faint, replaced by the cry of hungry bellies.

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One evening, Adaeze used the last of her melon to cook soup. She divided it carefully, ensuring each child had a fair portion. Nneoma, however, kept her pot sealed, feeding only her children. When Ifunanya wandered near, Nneoma pulled her own daughters closer, hissing, "Go and eat from your mother's pot. This food is not yours."

The children began to drift apart, mirroring their mothers' rivalry.

The Farmer's Despair

Obinna, worn and weary, sat one night under the udala tree. His hands were blistered, his body aching, but his spirit hurt most. He had thought two wives meant two hands to build his wealth, two hearts to share his burdens. Instead, he found himself divided, weakened, mocked by the village, and now threatened by hunger.

He whispered into the night, "Chi m, my God, where did I go wrong? I sought peace, but I have reaped division. I sought strength, but I have found weakness."

The wind rustled the dry leaves above him, offering no answer.

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And as the drought stretched on, Obinna realized that the trial before him was not only the famine of the land—it was the famine within his own household.

Chapter Nine

– Adaeze's Choice

The famine bit deeper with every passing week. Smoke no longer rose from many kitchens in Umuaka. Mothers whispered their fears in the market, and fathers returned from their farms with empty baskets. The drought had humbled even the proudest men.

In Obinna's household, the strain grew sharper. Nneoma clung fiercely to her independence, guarding her harvest as though sharing it would bring her ruin. Adaeze, on the other hand, grew more restless, sensing that the survival of the family required more than stubborn pride.

The Journey to the Oracle

One gray morning, before the first cock crowed, Adaeze wrapped her wrapper tightly and left her hut. She walked the narrow bush path that led to the grove of Udo, the village oracle. Her bare feet touched the cool earth as she whispered prayers under her breath.

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When she arrived, the old priestess, Mama Nwanyi, sat at the shrine entrance, her eyes clouded with age but her voice sharp with authority.

“Daughter of Obinna, why do you come with dust on your feet and worry on your face?”

Adaeze knelt, her forehead touching the ground.

“Mother, our barns are empty, our children cry with hunger. My husband is weary, my co-wife is proud. I have come to ask the spirits for a way out. What must we do to save our household?”

The priestess closed her eyes and sprinkled white chalk on the earth. She cast cowries and muttered incantations. After a long silence, she spoke:

“The gods say the earth is thirsty. A sacrifice of unity is required. Your household must pour libation together, as one. If division remains, even the yam that grows will turn bitter.”

Adaeze's heart trembled. She knew convincing Nneoma would be harder than convincing the gods themselves.

Nneoma's Defiance

That evening, Adaeze shared the oracle's message under the udala tree. Obinna listened intently, hope flickering in his tired eyes.

But Nneoma scoffed, folding her arms.

"So you crept to the grove like an old woman chasing shadows? Adaeze, must you always cling to these rituals? What will libation give us that hard work cannot? If you need spirits, then call them to your farm. As for me, I will rely on my hands and not on chalk and cowries."

Obinna's brow furrowed. "Nneoma, do not mock. The oracle's words have guided our fathers before us."

Nneoma's laughter was sharp.

"Then let your fathers eat the sacrifice. I will not kneel beside Adaeze for any ritual. If the gods want unity, they must plant it themselves."

Adaeze's eyes filled with quiet tears, but she spoke softly, almost to herself:

"One day, pride will choke more than hunger."

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The Dividing Line

The weeks that followed widened the gulf. Adaeze, with her children, poured small libations on their farm, praying for rain. She taught her children to share even their meager meals with one another.

Nneoma, meanwhile, tightened her grip on her harvest, teaching her children to fend for themselves, to look only to their mother.

The children began to reflect the lessons of their mothers—Adaeze's sons brought water to their sisters, while Nneoma's daughters mocked them for weakness. The compound, once alive with laughter, grew into a field of whispers and glares.

Obinna's Burden

At night, Obinna lay awake, listening to the sighs of hunger and the silence of broken unity. He turned on his raffia mat, staring at the thatched roof.

His heart pulled in two directions—toward Adaeze's humility and faith, and toward Nneoma's pride and defiance. Both women carried strength, but in opposite ways.

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He whispered into the darkness, "What kind of farmer am I, who cannot even till peace in his own home?"

The night offered no answer, only the distant cry of a hungry child.

The drought lingered. The gods had spoken, but the sacrifice of unity remained unmade.

And in that silence, fate prepared its own test.

Chapter Ten

– The Rainmaker's Prophecy

The drought had gone from a burden to a curse. By the third moon, even the strongest men in Umuaka bent their backs in despair. Women walked miles to fetch muddy water, children grew thin, and the market became a place of whispers instead of trade.

The elders, troubled and weary, gathered under the great iroko tree to deliberate. It was there the decision was made: they would send for the rainmaker.

The Rainmaker's Arrival

Days later, a hush fell over the village when the rainmaker appeared. He was a tall, gaunt man with chalked patterns drawn across his chest and cowries tied into his long, tangled hair. He carried a staff tipped with feathers and gourds that rattled like thunder when he walked.

The villagers followed him as he entered the square, their eyes full of fear and hope. Children clutched their mothers' wrappers. Even Obinna, though skeptical,

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joined the crowd, his wives standing apart from one another.

The rainmaker raised his staff, his voice booming like distant thunder.

"You have called me, sons and daughters of Umuaka. But know this: the sky does not withhold its waters without cause. Before the heavens open, the earth must heal her wounds."

The elders bowed, their voices trembling. "Tell us, master, what sacrifice must be made?"

The Prophecy

The rainmaker shook his gourds, cast them upon the ground, and stared long at their arrangement. His eyes clouded as though he looked beyond the living. Then he spoke:

"The gods have shown me: the famine is not only of the sky but of the heart. There is division in a home that must be mended. Unless unity is restored in that household, the rains will remain far."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the crowd. Faces turned instinctively toward Obinna. Whispers rose:

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"It is his compound..."

"Two wives who live like strangers..."

"Yes, the gods speak of him."

Obinna felt every gaze burn into his skin. Nneoma stiffened, her jaw set, while Adaeze lowered her eyes in shame.

The rainmaker lifted his staff again.

"Until that home becomes one, the sky will remain closed. The sacrifice of unity must be made at the shrine of Ala, the earth goddess. Husband, wives, and children together—else Umuaka will perish."

The Weight of the Words

That night, Obinna's compound was heavy with silence. His children, restless and hungry, whispered in corners. Adaeze sat by the fire, grinding melon seeds though there was no oil to cook them with. Nneoma paced her hut like a trapped bird.

At last, Obinna spoke, his voice low but firm.

"You heard the words of the rainmaker. The whole village now looks at us. If we refuse, and the rains do not come, our people will curse my name."

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Adaeze bowed her head. "I will kneel at the shrine, Obinna. I will do whatever is asked."

But Nneoma's eyes flashed with fire.

"I will not be shamed before the village. Unity cannot be forced with chalk and drums. If the gods want rain, let them send it without dragging me into Adaeze's shadow!"

Her words cut through the compound like a blade.

Obinna's heart grew heavy. He was no longer just a farmer with divided wives. He was the man whose household now carried the fate of an entire village.

The Village's Demand

The following morning, elders visited Obinna. They stood at his threshold with solemn faces.

"Obinna," the oldest, Ichie Okeke, said, "you heard the prophecy. If your wives will not unite, the hunger of the people will rest upon your head. Do not let stubbornness bring ruin to us all."

Obinna bowed respectfully, but his voice cracked.

"Elders, I will do my best. But a man cannot tie two rivers together if one refuses to flow."

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Ichie Okeke placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Then you must find a way, son. For if you fail, the wrath of the gods may not fall only on your compound—but on all of Umuaka.”

That night, as thunder rolled faintly in the distance yet no rain fell, Obinna realized his greatest trial was not the drought itself, but the war within his home.

The sky waited. The earth waited. And so did the village.

Chapter Eleven

– Nneoma's Rebellion

The days after the rainmaker's prophecy were heavy with whispers. At the stream, women spoke in low voices, glancing toward Obinna's household. In the market, traders shook their heads whenever his name was mentioned. Even children, innocent yet sharp, pointed fingers and said, *"That is the compound keeping the sky closed."*

The burden of blame pressed down on Obinna's family. Yet inside the compound, peace was still a stranger.

Nneoma's Outburst

One evening, as the moon rose pale and thin, Obinna gathered his wives and children under the udala tree. His voice trembled, but he spoke with determination.

"The elders have spoken. The rainmaker has spoken. We must appear together at the shrine of Ala. We must offer the sacrifice of unity, or the famine will not break."

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Adaeze nodded quickly, her eyes shining with resolve. "Husband, I am ready. Let us go tomorrow, before hunger consumes more lives."

But Nneoma's laughter rang sharp and bitter. She stood, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

"So, this is what it has come to? That I, Nneoma, must kneel beside Adaeze as though we are sisters? That I must let the whole village see me bow before a lie?"

Obinna's voice hardened. "This is no lie, woman. The gods have spoken, and the people are watching us."

Nneoma's eyes flashed like fire. "Let them watch! Let the gods watch too! I will not be a puppet dancing to cowries and drums. If Adaeze wants to carry the village's burden on her head, let her do it alone. As for me and my children, we will not bow."

Her words cut through the night. Even the children fell silent, their small eyes darting between their mother and father.

The Village Confrontation

The next morning, news spread quickly: Nneoma had refused. Before long, a crowd gathered outside Obinna's

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compound. Elders, women, and even young men stood with folded arms, waiting for a sign of unity.

When Obinna stepped out, the village spokesman raised his voice.

"Farmer Obinna, the rainmaker's words were clear. Where are your wives? Where is the sacrifice of unity?"

Adaeze emerged quietly, her head bowed in humility. But Nneoma remained inside, her defiance as thick as smoke.

The murmurs grew louder.

"She mocks the gods..."

"Her pride will kill us all..."

"Why does Obinna not control his own household?"

Finally, Nneoma stormed out, her wrapper tied firmly at her waist. She faced the crowd with a sneer.

"Do not waste your tongues on me! The gods you fear are nothing but shadows. If rain falls, it will fall by nature, not by chalk or by sacrifice. Hunger comes to test men's strength, not to bow them into false unity. I will not kneel for fear. I will not kneel for Adaeze. If that angers your gods, let them strike me down!"

Gasps erupted from the crowd. Women covered their mouths; men muttered curses. Even the elders

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trembled, for such words had never been spoken so boldly in Umuaka.

Obinna's Shame

Obinna's heart sank. His legs felt weak beneath him as the weight of the village's eyes bore into him.

"Control your wife, Obinna," one elder said coldly.
"If she continues this rebellion, the curse will not leave your household," another added.

But Obinna stood frozen, torn between love, shame, and helpless rage.

Adaeze wept quietly, clutching her children. Nneoma, unshaken, lifted her chin high, as though daring both man and god alike to challenge her.

The Turning Point

That night, Obinna sat alone in his farm, staring at the dry ridges under the moonlight. His hands dug into the soil, crumbling the dust that once yielded yam and cassava.

He whispered to himself, broken:
"What curse is this—that my strength cannot command

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peace in my home, nor rain for my people? Must I choose between my wives and the life of a whole village?"

For the first time, the farmer understood that his battle was not only with the drought, but with the pride that had taken root in his family.

And until that root was torn out, no rain would ever fall.

Chapter Twelve

– The Price of Pride

The famine tightened its grip on Umuaka like a snake refusing to let go. The yam barns were hollow, the once-green farmlands looked like burnt hides, and even the stream that had never dried before began to shrink into muddy pools.

Everywhere, people spoke of Obinna's household—how one woman's pride held the entire community hostage.

The Rainmaker's Visit

Three days after Nneoma's outburst, the rainmaker himself came to Obinna's compound. He was tall and lean, his hair locked in long, gray ropes, his staff adorned with cowries that jingled as he walked.

Children scattered when they saw him, for it was said he could summon lightning with a word. The villagers followed at a distance, whispering.

He stopped at the center of Obinna's compound, his voice deep and commanding.

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"Nneoma, daughter of the earth, come forth!"

When Nneoma appeared, she stood boldly, refusing to bow. The rainmaker fixed his piercing eyes on her.

"Your pride is a stone in the path of rain. Do you not fear the curse that hangs over your household?"

Nneoma's voice was sharp. "Old man, your tricks cannot scare me. I bow to no staff, no cowries, and no empty rituals. If rain will fall, let it fall without my kneeling. If famine must kill, let it kill. But I will not bend!"

Gasps swept through the crowd. Even Obinna's knees grew weak, for her words felt like an abomination.

The rainmaker struck the ground with his staff. The earth cracked lightly beneath it, a small puff of dust rising.

"Then hear this, Nneoma. The gods will not force your knees to the ground—but they will remind you that pride cannot feed the belly. What you refuse to give willingly, life will take by force."

He turned and left, his staff echoing against the earth. The villagers followed in silence, their fear heavier than hunger.

The First Blow

That night, a scream tore through the compound. It was Nneoma's eldest daughter, writhing on her mat, her belly swollen and her breath shallow. The child had eaten a handful of dried cassava, too bitter and unripe for the body.

Despite herbs, chants, and frantic care, the girl's breathing slowed, then stopped. Death had entered Obinna's household.

Adaeze wept as though the child were her own, cradling Nneoma's daughter in her arms. But Nneoma stood frozen, her eyes wide, her lips trembling.

"Not my child... not my child," she whispered.

Obinna buried the girl at dawn, his tears mixing with dust as he dug the grave with his bare hands.

The villagers shook their heads. "The curse has begun."

Nneoma's Struggle

For the first time, Nneoma's pride faltered. She stayed in her hut, refusing food, staring blankly at the wall.

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Adaeze tried to comfort her, but Nneoma pushed her away.

When she finally emerged days later, her voice was hoarse, her strength gone. She looked at Obinna and whispered:

“Perhaps the gods have truly turned against me. But must they take my child to prove it?”

Obinna placed a trembling hand on her shoulder. “The gods punish the stubborn. But they also forgive the repentant. We still have a chance to make peace.”

Nneoma did not answer. She walked back into her hut, her silence louder than her former rebellion.

The Village's Patience Wears Thin

Meanwhile, the village elders gathered in the square. Hunger had made men restless and desperate.

One elder spoke: “We cannot allow one household to hold us all hostage. If Obinna's wives refuse unity, then the people must choose for them.”

Another added grimly: “If the sacrifice is not made, we may need to drive them out. Better one family perish than the whole community.”

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The decision loomed like a storm.

The Weight of Consequence

That night, as Obinna lay awake, he heard whispers outside his compound—villagers muttering, children mocking, women sighing.

Adaeze prayed quietly by the doorway, her tears staining the dust. Nneoma sat in the shadows of her hut, clutching her surviving children tightly, as if the gods might snatch them away at any moment.

The price of pride had already begun to fall.

And the village had reached its breaking point.

Chapter Thirteen

– The Elders' Verdict

The sun rose over Umuaka with a pale, lifeless glow, as though even the heavens had grown weary of shining on hungry faces. The village square filled quickly that morning—elders on carved stools, young men leaning on their hoes, mothers with babies tied to their backs, and children too weak to play.

The air was heavy with expectation. The talking drum beat slowly, summoning every household. Today, the matter of Obinna's family would be settled.

The Council Convenes

Elder Ugochukwu, the oldest man in the clan, cleared his throat, his walking stick tapping the earth for silence.

“My people, we have endured famine before. We have seen droughts and floods. But never have we seen a household stand against the will of the gods, dragging us all toward ruin. The rainmaker has spoken. The oracle has spoken. Yet stubbornness remains in Obinna's compound.”

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Murmurs rippled through the crowd. All eyes turned toward Obinna, who sat with his head bowed. Beside him, Adaeze sat quietly, her face covered with a white scarf of humility. Nneoma stood apart, her eyes hollow, her children clinging to her wrapper.

The elder continued:

"The gods demand unity. Without it, the rain will not fall. We are gathered to decide—shall we wait for their destruction to spread to us all, or shall we act as one people and save Umuaka?"

The Voice of the People

A young man from the crowd shouted:

"If they cannot unite, cast them out! Let their pride perish in the bush, far from us."

An old woman shook her head and added:

"No child of Umuaka should be abandoned. But if they remain divided, their blood will stain us all. The sacrifice must be made—even if it is forced."

Another voice rose:

"Obinna is a good man, but his wives pull him apart like wrestlers in the sand. He must choose! Let him keep one wife and send the other away. Only then will unity return."

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The square erupted with debate—some calling for exile, others for separation, a few urging patience. But all agreed on one thing: the family could no longer remain as it was.

Obinna's Summons

Elder Ugochukwu raised his staff, and silence fell. "Obinna, son of Nweke, step forward. The village has spoken. Your household is the key to our survival. Choose today: either you and your wives make peace and perform the sacrifice, or the council will act in your place."

Obinna rose slowly, his chest heavy with the weight of judgment. He looked at Adaeze, whose eyes were full of quiet faith, and then at Nneoma, whose pride had withered into grief.

"My fathers," he began, his voice trembling, "I did not choose this path. I sought only to provide for my family. But now the burden of the whole village rests on my shoulders. I cannot carry it alone. Let my wives speak, for without them, my voice is empty."

The Wives Confront the Truth

Adaeze stood first, her hands clasped.

"I am ready, my fathers. I have always been ready. Let us kneel before the gods, pour the libation, and restore peace. A house divided cannot stand."

All eyes turned to Nneoma. She hesitated, her lips quivering, her hands trembling as she held her children. At last, she spoke:

"My fathers, my heart has been proud, and my pride has taken my child. I did not see until it was too late. But I cannot—" she broke off, her voice cracking—"I cannot kneel beside Adaeze. Her shadow has always darkened me. If she remains, my heart will never know peace."

The crowd gasped.

Adaeze closed her eyes in sorrow. Obinna's face fell.

Elder Ugochukwu struck the ground with his staff.

"Then it is clear. Unity cannot live where jealousy feeds. Obinna, the choice falls on you. Choose the wife who will walk with you to the gods. The other must leave this compound before the next moon."

The Verdict

Silence blanketed the square. Obinna's heart pounded. The choice before him was not just between two women, but between peace and ruin, survival and destruction.

He raised his head, his voice heavy but firm:
"If it must be so, then..."

The crowd leaned forward, waiting for the name that would decide the fate of his family—and perhaps the fate of Umuaka itself.

Chapter Fourteen

– The Choice

The square of Umuaka fell into a silence so heavy that even the birds in the trees seemed to hold their songs. Obinna stood before the elders, sweat glistening on his brow, his heart pounding like a drum at the new yam festival.

His eyes moved from Adaeze—calm, steady, her hands folded over her lap—to Nneoma, trembling yet defiant, clutching her children as if they might be stolen from her. Behind them, the villagers leaned in, waiting for the word that would cut one life free and bind another forever.

The Farmer Speaks

Obinna raised his voice, thick with sorrow.

“My fathers, I did not seek to divide my house. The gods gave me two wives, and I accepted them, believing I could carry peace in both hands. But now, one hand is heavy with pride, the other with patience. The rain has ceased because of our quarrel, and the land bleeds with

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hunger. If a sacrifice must be made, then let me speak the truth."

He turned first to Nneoma.

"Nneoma, your laughter once filled my nights with joy. But your pride has burned too fiercely, and it has scorched our children, our home, and even the land. I cannot walk with a woman whose heart refuses peace."

Nneoma gasped, staggering back as if struck. Her children clung tighter to her wrapper.

Then Obinna turned to Adaeze.

"Adaeze, you have borne the weight of silence, the sting of insult, and the burden of patience. In you lies the peace the gods demand. If the rains must return, then it is with you I will kneel before the shrine."

The crowd erupted—some with cheers, others with murmurs of pity for Nneoma. The women whispered, "At last, the patient hen has laid her golden egg." The men nodded gravely, though some shook their heads at the harshness of the choice.

The Elders' Decree

Elder Ugochukwu struck his staff upon the earth.

"So it is spoken, so it shall be. Adaeze shall remain as

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Obinna's wife. Nneoma must leave this compound before the next moon. Only then will the sacrifice be accepted by the gods."

The talking drum thundered once, sealing the verdict.

Nneoma's Departure

Nneoma's voice rose above the noise, bitter and broken. "So this is how Umuaka repays me? Have I not labored in the farm? Have I not borne children? Am I to be cast out like a dog because I would not bow before another woman?"

She turned to Obinna, her eyes blazing through tears. "You chose her, not because she is better, but because she bends her neck like a goat led to slaughter. One day, husband, you will taste the emptiness of a house with only silence for company."

With that, she gathered her children, tears streaming down her face, and stormed out of the square. Some women followed to console her, others shook their heads, muttering that she had sown the wind and now reaped the whirlwind.

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The Ritual Begins

That night, the village prepared for the sacrifice. Palm wine flowed, kola nuts were broken, and a spotless white goat was tied before the shrine. Adaeze stood beside Obinna, her head covered, her hands steady as she held the calabash of libation.

When Obinna knelt and poured the palm wine upon the earth, his voice rang out:

“Oh gods of our fathers, see us now! We have cast away division. We offer this blood for peace, for rain, for life. Let the heavens open once more!”

The goat's cry split the air as the priest's knife struck, and the earth drank deeply of its blood. The crowd watched in silence, hearts trembling with hope.

The First Drop

As the last words of the prayer rose, a cool wind swept through the square. Clouds gathered swiftly overhead. And then—soft, tentative at first—a single drop of rain fell on Obinna's brow.

The crowd gasped. Another drop, then another, until the heavens broke open with a downpour. Children shrieked

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with joy, women lifted their wrappers to the sky, men danced barefoot in the mud. The famine was ending.

But beneath the rain, Obinna stood still, his heart heavy. For though the gods had answered, he knew he had lost a part of himself that no rain could restore.

And somewhere in the distance, beyond the pounding rain, Nneoma's cry echoed—a sound of grief that would haunt the village long after the famine was forgotten.

Chapter Fifteen

– The Return of the Rains

The rains did not stop for three days. They beat upon the thatched roofs, turning dusty paths into flowing streams, filling the yam mounds with life once more. The people of Umuaka sang praises to the gods, their voices lifted in relief. Children danced naked in the downpour, their laughter rolling like drums across the fields.

The famine had been broken. But in Obinna's compound, the harvest of sorrow had only begun.

The Empty Hut

Nneoma's hut stood silent, its doorway dark, its hearth cold. Her mats were gone, her pots carried away, her footprints erased by the rain. For the first time since Obinna had married her, the compound felt smaller, yet emptier.

At dawn, Adaeze sat outside her hut, her wrapper tied tightly as she watched Obinna return from the farm. His

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shoulders sagged despite the blessings of the rain. She rose slowly, offering him a calabash of warm pap.

"You have done what the gods demanded," she said softly.

Obinna took the calabash but did not drink. His eyes lingered on the empty hut.

"Adaeze," he murmured, "when the rains fall, they wash the earth, but they cannot wash the heart. Tell me—did I choose rightly? Or did I only trade one pain for another?"

Adaeze's lips trembled, but she forced a smile.

"You chose peace. And sometimes, husband, peace comes with wounds."

The Children's Wounds

Chukwudi, Obinna's eldest, took quickly to the work of the farm, his silence heavy but his spirit strong. He buried himself in the soil, ploughing harder than before, as if to drown his pain in sweat.

But little Obiora, Nneoma's son, could not hide his grief. He would sit by the compound gate, staring at the path where his mother had vanished. At night, he cried into his mat, his voice breaking the silence of the compound.

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"Papa," he whispered one evening, clutching Obinna's wrapper, "when will Mama come back? Did the gods send her away too?"

Obinna's heart cracked open. He drew the boy into his arms, his voice thick.

"No, my son. Your mother went her way because of man, not because of the gods. But one day, when you are older, you will seek her, and she will tell you her own story."

Obiora sobbed quietly. Adaeze, from her corner, turned her face away, hiding the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

The Village Heals

In the weeks that followed, yam vines sprouted strong, cassava swelled in the earth, and the granaries filled once more. The people of Umuaka rejoiced, but in every gathering, whispers of Obinna's choice lingered.

Some praised him for saving the land.

"Without him, the gods would not have heard us."

Others pitied him.

"What use is rain if a man's house is dry with sorrow?"

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And still, a few muttered in scorn.

"He drove one wife away. Tomorrow, the gods may demand more."

Adaeze's Silent Triumph

For Adaeze, the return of the rains was a quiet victory. No longer did she share her kitchen fire, her husband's words, or her bed. Yet victory tasted bitter. She had won not by her strength, but by the breaking of another woman.

At night, as she listened to Obinna's restless sighs, she wondered:

Was this the life I had prayed for? A home, yes, but shadowed by a ghost that will never leave?

She prayed silently that the wound in her husband's heart would one day heal, even as she knew Nneoma's shadow would never fully fade.

The Farmer's Reflection

One evening, Obinna stood in his flourishing yam field, watching the vines climb high into the sky. The soil was rich, the promise of harvest abundant. Yet within him, the soil was barren.

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He lifted his hoe, then set it down, whispering to the wind:

"I gave the gods my laughter to buy rain for the people. They took Nneoma from me, and still, I wonder—was it truly the gods, or only the weakness of a man who could not hold two worlds together?"

The wind carried no answer. Only the rustle of yam leaves, whispering secrets too old for men to understand.

The rains had returned, but in Obinna's house, healing would take longer than any season.

Chapter Sixteen

– The Ghost of Nneoma

The rains had settled into their rhythm, falling with kindness and leaving the fields green. Life in Umuaka began to mend, but Obinna's compound still carried a silence that no song of birds could break.

And then, one morning, the silence broke—not with Nneoma's return, but with whispers of her name.

Whispers at the Market

It was at the village market that Adaeze first heard it. She had gone to sell dried fish when a group of women, their baskets heavy with cassava, leaned close and spoke in voices that carried just enough for her ears.

"They say Nneoma has found a place in Umunneochi."

"Eh! Umunneochi? That far?"

"Yes, she stays with her mother's people now. Some even say she sells palm oil and raffia mats by the roadside."

"And she is fatter now, o! Living well."

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Adaeze froze. Her hands trembled as she counted cowries for her customer. She wanted to walk away, but her legs rooted to the ground. For the first time, she realized that Nneoma had not vanished into thin air. She was alive—thriving even—while the shadow of her absence haunted Obinna's home.

Obiora's Question

That evening, as the moon rose, little Obiora crept to his father's side. He had been unusually quiet, but his eyes carried a fire that Obinna had seen before—Nneoma's stubbornness.

"Papa," Obiora whispered, "today I heard from boys at the stream. They said Mama lives in Umunneochi. Is it true?"

The hoe slipped from Obinna's hand. His chest tightened. He looked at his son and saw the longing there, the ache of a child robbed too soon of his mother.

"Yes, my son," Obinna admitted, his voice low. "Your mother lives, but she chose another path. One day, when you are strong, you may walk that path to her."

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"But why can't we go now?" Obiora pressed, his small fists clenched. "She is not dead. Why can't we visit her like we visit Uncle Eze in the next village?"

Obinna swallowed hard. He had no answer that would not cut the boy deeper. He only drew Obiora into his arms, holding him until the child's sobs melted into sleep.

From the doorway, Adaeze watched, her heart a storm of pity and resentment. She could give Obiora food, clothes, and shelter, but not the one thing he craved most: his mother's embrace.

The Return of Ghosts

The whispers spread quickly. Everywhere Obinna went, he felt the weight of curious eyes. Men at the palm wine tap would nudge one another and mutter, "His wife lives well in Umunneochi, while he sits here like a man with half a home."

Some mocked him. Others pitied him. But all reminded him of the truth he tried to bury—Nneoma's absence was not death. It was a living wound.

At night, he dreamed of her. He saw her laughter, her fire, the way she argued and yet still found ways to smile

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at him when no one watched. He would wake with his chest heavy, his heart torn between regret and defiance.

Adaeze's Uneasy Triumph

For Adaeze, Nneoma's ghost was worse than her presence. When Nneoma was here, at least Adaeze could see her, argue with her, measure herself against her. Now, she was a story, a shadow whispered in markets and streams, a woman who lived freely without sharing a man's roof.

And worst of all—she was remembered with admiration.

That night, Adaeze lay beside Obinna, listening to his restless breaths. For the first time, she feared she had not won anything at all. She had only been left behind with a man whose heart was divided between duty and longing.

The Children's Resolve

Days later, Chukwudi approached his younger brother, Obiora, as they weeded the yam farm. He found Obiora staring toward the road, his hoe forgotten in the soil.

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“Why do you look that way, little brother?” Chukwudi asked gently.

Obiora's lips trembled. “One day, I will go to Umunneochi. I will find Mama. I don't care what Papa says. I must see her with my own eyes.”

Chukwudi tightened his grip on the hoe. He did not answer at once. He too had heard the whispers, and though he loved Adaeze, he could not silence the truth: Obiora deserved his mother.

He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. “When the time is right, I will go with you. No one will stop us.”

The promise hung heavy in the air. For in that moment, Obinna's household—already fractured—planted a seed that could one day grow into rebellion.

Nneoma was gone, but her ghost walked daily in Obinna's compound. And in the hearts of her children, it was not a ghost at all—it was a call.

Chapter Seventeen

– The Journey Begins

The sun burned hotter than usual that morning, casting long shadows across the ridges of yam and cassava. The earth was dry, the air thick, and the silence between father and sons heavier than a sack of maize.

Obinna worked in the fields, sweat dripping down his back, but his mind was elsewhere—still wrestling with the rumors of Nneoma. Adaeze moved quietly around the compound, her hands busy with chores, though her ears strained for the sound of any fresh gossip from passersby.

And the boys—Chukwudi and Obiora—were planning something neither parent suspected.

The Secret Pact

That evening, as the compound slipped into the quiet hum of night, Obiora slipped into Chukwudi's hut. A dim oil lamp flickered, throwing shadows against the mud walls.

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“Brother,” Obiora whispered urgently, “I cannot wait anymore. Every night I see Mama in my dreams. She calls me. She says she is waiting. What if she forgets me?”

Chukwudi put a hand on his brother's shoulder. His face, though still young, carried the seriousness of a man older than his years.

“Obiora, you must be patient. Father will not allow us to walk to Umunneochi. It is far, and the bush paths are dangerous. But if you truly cannot endure it, then we must be wise.”

Obiora's eyes burned with determination. “Then take me. You are strong, and I will follow. We will find Mama.”

For a long moment, Chukwudi said nothing. He knew the risk—disobeying their father could bring punishment, even banishment. Yet he also knew the longing in his brother's heart.

Finally, he nodded. “At the next market day, we will go. The paths will be filled with travelers. If we follow them, no one will notice us. But Obiora, once we start, there is no turning back unless we find her.”

Obiora's smile was the brightest Chukwudi had seen in months.

The Departure

Three days later, the market bell rang, calling the village into its rhythm of trade and chatter. Adaeze tied her wrapper tightly and prepared to join the women heading there. Obinna stayed behind to mend tools.

It was the perfect chance.

Chukwudi carried a small calabash of water and a pouch of roasted groundnuts, while Obiora clutched nothing but a slingshot tucked into his waistband. Their hearts pounded as they slipped away from the compound, blending into the stream of villagers heading toward the red earth road.

The air was alive with voices—traders calling prices, women balancing baskets of palm kernels, children chasing each other with laughter. The brothers kept close, moving with the crowd until the familiar huts of Umuaka faded behind them.

For the first time, Obiora felt free.

The Long Road

The path stretched wide and endless. They passed tall palms that swayed like watchmen, streams that glistened under the sun, and farms where strangers waved in greeting. The boys walked until their legs ached, but neither spoke of turning back.

"Brother," Obiora asked breathlessly, "how far is Umunneochi?"

"Far," Chukwudi admitted, "but not beyond us. If Mama is truly there, we will find her."

By noon, their water was gone. By afternoon, their shadows stretched thin across the dust. Still, they pressed on, guided only by travelers' whispers and the hope burning in their chests.

The Stranger on the Road

As evening neared, the boys reached a fork in the road. They stood, uncertain which path to take, when a figure appeared.

It was an old woman, bent and wrinkled, balancing a bundle of firewood on her head. Her eyes were sharp, though her voice cracked with age.

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"Children," she called, "where do you wander, so far from home?"

Chukwudi hesitated but answered respectfully, "Mama, we seek Umunneochi. Do you know the way?"

The old woman studied them, her gaze piercing.

"Umunneochi? That is no place for children alone. The road is long, the night is cruel, and the forest spirits do not sleep."

Obiora stepped forward, his voice trembling but firm.

"We are not afraid. We must find our mother."

At his words, the old woman's face softened. She sighed deeply, then pointed her stick toward the left path.

"Follow that road. But remember—when you meet the three stones standing in a circle, do not look back, no matter what you hear. If you do, the spirits will confuse your steps."

The brothers exchanged nervous glances, but nodded. They thanked her and continued.

As they walked, Obiora whispered, "Do you think she was only warning us like a grandmother would?"

Chukwudi's jaw tightened. "Or maybe she truly knows what waits on this road."

The First Night

Darkness fell swiftly, swallowing the forest in shadows. Crickets chirped, owls hooted, and the path grew colder. The boys huddled under a tree, their stomachs empty, their bodies weary.

Chukwudi wrapped an arm around his brother. "Sleep, Obiora. Tomorrow we will walk again. Tomorrow we will be closer."

Obiora closed his eyes, dreaming of Nneoma's arms, while Chukwudi stayed awake, listening to the sounds of the night.

For though the journey had begun with hope, he knew it was only a matter of time before danger found them.

Chapter Eighteen

– The Circle of Stones

The forest was silent at dawn, save for the rustling of leaves and the distant cry of a hornbill. Chukwudi shook Obiora awake, urging him to rise. Their clothes were dusty, their feet sore, but the fire in their hearts refused to dim.

“Come,” Chukwudi whispered, helping his brother up. “The road waits for us.”

They pressed on, guided by the old woman's words. The path twisted through thick trees and tall grasses, the air heavy with damp earth and the scent of wild blossoms. Every step carried them deeper into the unknown.

The Three Stones

By mid-morning, the boys reached a clearing—and there it was.

Three stones, each taller than a man, stood upright in a perfect circle. Their surfaces were rough, covered in strange markings like scars carved by ancient hands.

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Sunlight filtered through the trees, striking the stones in a way that made them seem to glow faintly.

Obiora's eyes widened. "Brother... these must be the stones she spoke of."

Chukwudi nodded, his heart thudding. He remembered her warning: *Do not look back, no matter what you hear.*

They stepped into the circle. The air grew heavy, thick as if the world itself held its breath.

The Voices in the Forest

At first, there was only silence. Then—whispers.

Soft at first, like wind brushing through leaves. But soon the whispers grew clearer, rising into voices.

"Chukwudi..." a woman's voice called, gentle and familiar. "Turn back, my son. I am here."

Chukwudi froze. His breath caught in his throat. The voice—it was his mother's, Nneoma's.

Obiora gripped his hand tightly. "Brother, did you hear? It's Mama! She's behind us!"

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The boy tugged, desperate to turn, but Chukwudi clenched his jaw. His mind spun. Could it truly be her? Or was this the test the old woman warned of?

The voice grew stronger, now joined by another. This time it was deeper, harsher.

“Chukwudi... Obiora... come back at once!”

It was Obinna's voice, their father's.

Obiora gasped, trembling. “They are both here! Father and Mama! Why won't you look?”

Chukwudi shut his eyes tight, pulling his brother forward. “No, Obiora. It is not them. It is the forest. Do not listen. Do not turn.”

But the voices multiplied—now they heard laughter, crying, the wail of children, the sound of drums beating. The air vibrated with it, pressing against their ears, clawing at their hearts.

Obiora screamed, tears spilling down his cheeks.

“Mama! I hear you! Wait for me!”

He tried to wrench free from Chukwudi's grip, but his brother held fast, dragging him forward.

The Test of Strength

The more they walked, the louder the voices became, until it seemed the whole world was shouting at them.

Then, suddenly—footsteps.

Behind them, someone was running. Heavy, fast, drawing closer. The sound shook the earth beneath their feet.

Chukwudi's heart pounded, but he did not look back. He forced his legs to move faster, pulling Obiora with him.

"Don't turn!" he shouted above the noise. "No matter what happens, don't turn!"

But the footsteps grew louder—closer—until it felt as though something was breathing down their necks.

And then, just as suddenly as it began, everything stopped.

The voices vanished. The footsteps ceased. The air grew still.

The brothers stumbled out of the circle of stones, panting, trembling. Behind them, the forest was quiet, as though nothing had happened.

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The Road Ahead

Obiora collapsed onto the ground, sobbing. "Brother... I heard her. I swear it was Mama. Why didn't we look?"

Chukwudi knelt beside him, holding his shoulders firmly. "Because if we had looked, we might never have left that place. We might never have seen Mama at all."

Obiora buried his face in his brother's chest, torn between anger and sorrow. "But what if she was truly there? What if we left her behind?"

Chukwudi swallowed hard. He too wondered. But he could not show doubt—not now.

"We will see her, Obiora," he said firmly. "We will. But not in that circle. Our journey is not finished yet."

The younger boy nodded weakly, trusting his brother's strength.

Together, they rose and continued down the path, the memory of the stones heavy in their hearts.

Unseen Eyes

As they disappeared into the forest, the circle of stones remained behind, silent and eternal. But from the shadows, unseen eyes watched them.

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A figure cloaked in raffia stood just beyond the clearing, its face hidden by a wooden mask carved with strange symbols.

The masked watcher tilted its head slowly, as though marking the boys' courage. Then, without a sound, it melted back into the forest.

The road to Umunneochi was far from over—and the brothers had only passed the first test.

Chapter Nineteen

– The Drums of Umunneochi

The sun was sinking behind the hills when Chukwudi and Obiora stumbled into the outskirts of Umunneochi. Their bodies were weary, their clothes torn from thorns and branches, yet their eyes lit up at the sight of smoke curling from distant homesteads and the sound of voices rising in song.

But it was not ordinary song.

The air throbbed with drums—deep, rhythmic beats that rolled across the valley like thunder. Flutes shrilled in response, and women's voices chanted in unison. The boys froze, listening.

“Brother,” Obiora whispered, clutching Chukwudi's arm, “it sounds like a festival.”

Chukwudi nodded slowly. “Yes... but something feels strange. Why would they celebrate when the land looks so quiet, so dry?”

Indeed, as they approached the village, they noticed the fields surrounding it were parched. Maize stalks drooped, yam mounds had cracked, and the earth

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carried the smell of drought. Yet within the heart of the village, people danced as though they had no cares.

The Festival of Silence

They entered the village cautiously. Men and women painted in chalk designs whirled around the square, their feet pounding the red earth. At the center, three masked drummers struck giant wooden drums with such force the ground itself seemed to tremble.

Children ran about laughing, tossing cowrie shells into the air, while elders sat in a circle clapping in rhythm.

But what unsettled the brothers most was the silence between the beats.

Each time the drums paused, the entire village froze. Not a foot moved, not a breath stirred. Even babies stopped crying mid-wail. And then, as soon as the drumbeat returned, movement and laughter flowed again, as though nothing had happened.

Obiora tugged nervously at his brother's hand. "Why are they doing that? It's like they are under a spell."

Before Chukwudi could answer, a tall man with chalk-covered skin and beads strung across his chest approached. His eyes were sharp, piercing like a hawk's.

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"You are strangers," he said, his voice low and commanding. "From where do you come, and why do you enter Umunneochi on this night of drums?"

Chukwudi bowed slightly, pushing Obiora gently behind him. "We are travelers, seeking only rest. We mean no harm."

The man studied them for a long moment, then his lips curved into a thin smile. "Rest, you shall have. But tonight, you must join our festival. No stranger enters Umunneochi and refuses the drums."

The Warning

The brothers were led to the village square, where women placed garlands of palm fronds around their necks. Food was set before them—roasted yam, kola nuts, and palm wine.

Obiora's eyes widened with hunger, but Chukwudi placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Wait," he whispered.

An old woman, her back bent like a bow, shuffled toward them. Her eyes, clouded with age, still carried a sharpness that made Chukwudi's heart race—she

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reminded him of the woman by the river who had spoken of the three stones.

She leaned close and whispered, her breath hot and dry against Chukwudi's ear.

"Do not eat. Do not drink. And when the drums stop—close your eyes, or you will never leave this place."

Before Chukwudi could ask her more, she shuffled back into the crowd, swallowed by the dancers.

Obiora looked at him, confused. "Brother, what did she say?"

Chukwudi's jaw tightened. "Enough to know this festival is not what it seems. Keep your eyes sharp, and do as I do."

The Drumbeat Test

The drumming grew faster, wilder. The entire village moved like waves of the sea—hands clapping, feet stomping, voices chanting.

Then suddenly, the drums stopped.

The silence fell heavy, unnatural. The dancers froze mid-step, arms suspended in the air, faces locked in smiles

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that did not blink. Even the fire flames seemed to halt, flickering without movement.

Obiora's eyes widened in terror. He wanted to scream, but Chukwudi grabbed his hand and hissed:

"Close your eyes!"

Obiora squeezed them shut, trembling. He could feel the weight of the silence pressing against his skin, creeping into his ears like cold water.

A voice hissed in the darkness: *Open your eyes, Obiora... look, your mother is here.*

His heart lurched, but he clenched his brother's hand tighter.

Then—**BOOM!** The drums thundered again.

The dancers moved, the flames leapt, the spell broke. The village carried on as though nothing had happened.

Chukwudi opened his eyes, sweat dripping down his face. He glanced at Obiora, who was shaking but still beside him. Relief washed over him—but only briefly.

For he noticed something chilling.

In the crowd, a young man stood staring at them. His eyes were wide, empty, his body stiff. And unlike the others, when the drums began again... he did not move.

The Ominous Host

The tall, beaded man returned, smiling too broadly.

"You see," he said, his voice smooth as palm oil, "the drums welcome you. Stay with us, join our joy. For in Umunneochi, the drums never stop."

Chukwudi forced a polite smile, but his heart pounded. He knew now this village was no haven. It was a snare.

And if they did not escape before the festival ended... they might never escape at all.

Chapter Twenty

– The Boy Who Never Danced

The drumming raged deep into the night, rolling like thunder across Umunneochi. Chukwudi and Obiora sat at the edge of the square, their eyes wary, their hearts restless.

But Chukwudi's mind was not on the dancers. It was on the boy—the one who had not moved when the drums resumed.

The boy still stood there, stiff as a tree trunk, his face pale, his lips trembling. His wide eyes fixed on the brothers as though pleading for help. Yet no one else seemed to notice him. The dancers whirled past, the elders clapped, the flutes shrilled—but not a soul turned to him.

“Brother,” Obiora whispered, tugging at Chukwudi's arm, “look... that boy. Why is he standing so still?”

Chukwudi nodded slowly. “Because he is like us. He did not surrender to the drums.”

A Forbidden Meeting

When the drumming eased into a slower rhythm, Chukwudi rose and approached the boy. Obiora followed closely, his heart hammering.

The boy's lips twitched, and he whispered hoarsely:

"You are strangers... and yet you closed your eyes. That means you still have will."

"Will?" Chukwudi frowned. "What is this place? Why does everyone freeze when the drums fall silent?"

The boy's gaze darted nervously to the tall, beaded man at the center of the square. "Not here. They will hear. Meet me... by the shrine of the iroko tree... when the moon is highest."

Before Chukwudi could ask more, two women wrapped in raffia skirts swooped in, pulling the boy back into the crowd. Their smiles were wide, but their eyes glimmered like glass.

The Shrine of the Iroko

That night, when the drums slowed into a steady lull, Chukwudi nudged his brother. "Come. We must find him."

They slipped through the shadows, past huts and fires, until they reached the edge of the village. There stood a giant iroko tree, its trunk so wide that three men could not encircle it with their arms. At its base was a small shrine—a mound of clay topped with cowrie shells, feathers, and carved wooden figures.

The boy was waiting, his thin frame hunched, his eyes darting like a hunted animal.

"My name is Ifeanyi," he whispered. "And I am not supposed to be here. I was once like them, but I resisted too long. Now the drums cannot claim me fully... yet they cannot let me go."

Obiora shivered. "Claim you? What do you mean?"

Ifeanyi's face twisted in pain. "The drums are not music. They are chains. Every beat binds the people tighter to the spirit of the Drummer. Each time the silence comes, their souls are tested. If they dare to move, they vanish. If they freeze, they sink deeper into the spell. That is why none disobey. That is why none leave Umunneochi."

The Fate of the Silent Ones

Chukwudi's brows furrowed. "And what happens if someone refuses to follow? If they close their eyes, as we did?"

Ifeanyi's eyes glistened. "They are marked. The Drummer watches them. Some vanish in the night. Others... become like me. Half free, half bound."

He rolled up his sleeve, revealing skin crisscrossed with dark, vein-like lines that pulsed faintly in rhythm with the distant drums.

Obiora gasped and stepped back, but Ifeanyi shook his head. "Do not fear me. Fear the Drummer. He will not let you leave alive unless you break the drums."

Chukwudi's jaw tightened. "Break them? How?"

Ifeanyi's voice dropped lower. "The drums are carved from the iroko itself, blessed with the blood of the first sons of this land. To shatter them is to anger the spirit that feeds on our souls. But if you do not... you will join the dance, and never see your home again."

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The Oath of Escape

Chukwudi looked at Obiora, who trembled but met his brother's eyes with determination.

"We cannot stay here," Obiora said firmly. "We must break free, even if it means angering this Drummer."

Chukwudi nodded. Then he turned back to Ifeanyi. "Will you help us?"

Ifeanyi's lips curved into the faintest shadow of a smile. "I have waited for this chance for years. If outsiders strike, the spirit may falter. I will show you the path... but you must be brave. Once the drums break, the silence will come forever. And in that silence... many will fall."

The brothers exchanged a glance, their hearts pounding. They knew their journey had taken yet another perilous turn.

But neither was willing to be bound by the cursed drums of Umunneochi.

Chapter Twenty-One

– The Night of Shattered Beats

The moon hung swollen and bright above Umunneochi, casting a silver glow over the huts and the endless dance in the square. The drums thundered as always—relentless, hypnotic, their rhythm pulsing like the very heartbeat of the village.

But tonight, Chukwudi, Obiora, and Ifeanyi crept along the shadows of the square, their steps careful, their hearts hammering with the same tempo they sought to destroy.

Ifeanyi whispered as they crouched near the giant fire at the square's edge.

“The drums are kept in the sacred hut, behind the Drummer's throne. Only he touches them. If you break even one, the rhythm will collapse. But the spirit will fight back. Be ready.”

Obiora's throat was dry. “And if we fail?”

Ifeanyi's face darkened. “Then your souls will be chained forever. You will dance until the earth swallows you.”

The Sacred Hut

They waited until the Drummer's attention was on the dancers—his tall frame swaying, his hands guiding the rhythm with unseen force. Then, silently, they slipped behind the throne into the sacred hut.

Inside, the air was heavy, thick with incense and something darker—the smell of blood long dried into wood.

There they were: three massive drums, each carved from iroko trunk, their skins stretched with hide, their rims decorated with cowries, feathers, and faint streaks of what could only be sacrifice.

The drums pulsed faintly on their own, as though alive, as though breathing.

Obiora gasped. "They... they're moving!"

Chukwudi clenched his jaw. "No. Not moving. Beating. They carry the rhythm without hands."

Ifeanyi reached into the pouch at his side, pulling out a small stone, black and jagged. "This is all I could steal from the shrine. It is said to wound spirits, but I cannot strike. If I do, the drums will bind me forever. One of you must."

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He placed the stone in Chukwudi's hand. It burned cold, like ice forged in fire.

The First Strike

Chukwudi stepped forward, heart pounding. He raised the stone and brought it down hard upon the smallest drum.

CRACK!

A sharp sound split the night, louder than thunder, sharper than a spear striking rock. The drum's skin tore open, and from it burst a shrill scream—not of an instrument, but of something alive.

The dance outside faltered. The drummers paused. The crowd's feet froze mid-step.

Then the Drummer's voice boomed across the square:

“WHO DARES?”

The Spirit Awakens

The sacred hut shook as the tall figure of the Drummer entered. His eyes glowed red, his hands stretched like claws, and his voice rolled like ten thousand storms.

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"You dare strike my heart? You dare silence the rhythm that feeds your breath?"

The remaining drums throbbed louder, faster, as though summoning chains of sound. The villagers outside began to scream, their bodies twitching, some collapsing as if the very rhythm had been torn from them.

Obiora fell to his knees, covering his ears. "Brother, I cannot! The sound—it burns!"

Chukwudi gritted his teeth, raised the stone again, and struck the second drum.

BOOM!

This time the earth itself shook. From the broken drum spilled a dark mist, writhing like snakes, reaching for Chukwudi's arms. But Ifeanyi leapt forward, shoving the mist away with his own body. The black veins on his skin glowed fiercely as he cried out in agony.

"Strike the last one! Quickly!"

The Final Blow

The Drummer lunged forward, his massive hand reaching for Chukwudi. The air split with power, and for a moment it seemed the world itself held its breath.

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But Obiora, shaking and pale, rose suddenly, grabbed the stone from his brother, and with a scream of defiance, slammed it into the largest drum.

CRRRRRAAACK!

The sound was deafening, a roar that shattered the air itself. The last drum split open, and from it burst not mist, but light—blinding, searing, holy.

The Drummer howled, clutching his chest as his tall frame convulsed and crumbled into smoke. The villagers collapsed one by one, not in death but in silence—their eyes closing, their bodies freed from the endless dance.

The drums were no more. The rhythm was broken.

The Silence

For the first time in centuries, silence fell upon Umunneochi.

No drumbeat, no song, no dance. Only the sound of the night—crickets, wind, and the ragged breathing of three boys who had defied a spirit.

Ifeanyi lay on the floor, his chest heaving, his skin pale but no longer glowing with the cursed veins. He gave a weak smile. “You did it. You broke the chains.”

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Obiora sank beside him, trembling. Chukwudi stood still, staring at the shattered remains of the drums, his heart pounding with both victory and fear.

Because in the silence, a new question arose:

What had they unleashed?

Chapter Twenty-Two

– The Price of Silence

The dawn after the drums were broken was unlike any other Umunneochi had known.

For the first time in generations, the morning came without rhythm. No echo of drums, no footsteps beating in unison, no chants rising to the heavens. Instead, the village awoke in confusion—startled by the quiet that felt almost unbearable.

Children rubbed their eyes, asking why the “music” had stopped. Women who usually danced unconsciously while grinding grain found their hands still. Men sat before their huts, staring at one another, their bodies twitching as if searching for a rhythm that was no longer there.

The silence was heavier than the noise had ever been.

The Village Divided

By midday, whispers spread like wildfire.

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Some villagers fell on their knees, praising the silence, believing they had been freed from a curse they never recognized. They called it a blessing, a chance to live without chains.

But others wept, clutching their heads, their bodies trembling violently. "The drums gave us life!" they cried. "Without them, we are hollow! Bring them back!"

And in the center of the square, the elders gathered in anger. Their eyes were sharp as knives, fixed on the three boys.

Accusation

"YOU!" shouted Elder Okafor, his voice shaking with rage. "You have destroyed the covenant of our fathers! Do you know what you have done?"

Chukwudi stood his ground. "We saved you. The Drummer was not a god—he was a spirit feeding on your souls. The drums enslaved us all!"

But another elder spat on the ground. "Blasphemy! Those drums carried the breath of our ancestors! Without them, who are we? What is Umunneochi without rhythm?"

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The crowd erupted, some cheering the boys, others screaming curses. Fists were raised, stones were thrown. Obiora shielded his head as one struck him, blood running down his temple.

Chukwudi's heart pounded. For the first time, he saw that breaking the drums had not united the people—it had torn them apart.

The Fading of Ifeanyi

In the chaos, Ifeanyi staggered, leaning heavily on a broken post. His skin was still pale, the black veins fading but leaving scars that glowed faintly under the sun.

He coughed, his voice weak. "The spirit is gone... but it is not dead. The drums were vessels, yes... but the rhythm itself... it still lingers, waiting to take form again."

Chukwudi turned sharply. "What do you mean?"

Ifeanyi's eyes darkened. "Silence has a price. The spirit will seek another vessel. And if the people keep calling for the drums... it will return."

The Choice of the People

That night, the village gathered under the moon once more—not to dance, but to argue.

Some demanded the boys be banished for destroying tradition. Others insisted they should be hailed as heroes for breaking the chains.

In the shadows, Chukwudi listened, Obiora at his side, both of them feeling the weight of a community tearing itself in two.

Ifeanyi sat apart, his voice hoarse. “You must decide,” he whispered to them. “Do you fight to protect the silence... or do you help the people rebuild the rhythm in a way that does not enslave them?”

The question struck deep. For though the drums were gone, Chukwudi could feel it—the emptiness, the hunger for rhythm, even in himself. Humans could not live without beat, without music, without the pulse that carried life forward.

The danger was clear: silence was freedom, but it was also a void. And a void always called to be filled.

The Whisper in the Dark

As the villagers argued, a wind stirred through the square.

It carried no sound, no beat, only a faint whisper—low and sinister. Chukwudi froze, feeling it in his bones. It was the same presence as before, but softer now, like a shadow creeping back.

“Do you hear it?” Obiora whispered, trembling.

Chukwudi nodded slowly. “The Drummer is not gone. He is waiting.”

And in the distance, deep in the forest, a single, faint drumbeat answered the whisper.

Chapter Twenty-Three

– The Drum in the Forest

The night after the whisper passed through Umunneochi was restless.

Even the crickets seemed to falter, their chirps broken, unsure.

Chukwudi lay awake, staring at the ceiling of the hut. His ears rang with a sound no one else seemed to hear—the faint echo of a drum, deep and far, like thunder beneath the earth.

He turned to Obiora, who shared his mat. “Are you awake?”

“Yes,” Obiora whispered back. “It has not stopped. That sound...” He pressed his hands over his ears, trembling. “It is calling again.”

The Forest's Summon

At dawn, the boys could no longer ignore it. They rose, slipping quietly from the compound before the villagers

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stirred. The whisper led them, not with words, but with a pull—like invisible hands tugging their hearts.

Through the narrow footpaths, across the stream, into the thick belly of the forest, they walked. The deeper they went, the colder the air grew.

Then they heard it clearly:

“Dum... dum... dum...”

The rhythm rose from the earth itself, steady, patient, waiting.

At the center of a clearing stood something impossible: a tree split down the middle, its insides hollowed, its bark shaped like stretched skin. It was not carved by any man—it was a drum born of the forest itself.

Chukwudi froze. His mouth went dry. “The spirit... it has made a new vessel.”

Obiora's knees nearly gave way. “But we destroyed the drums! We ended it!”

A low laugh rumbled through the clearing, the leaves trembling though no wind blew. The voice was everywhere, nowhere, inside their heads.

“You cannot end rhythm. As long as men crave beat, I will return.”

The Temptation

The spirit spoke, its tone smoother than before, almost seductive.

“Look at your people. Broken without rhythm. Divided by silence. They will destroy themselves. But you... you can save them.”

The hollow tree pulsed, glowing faintly with red veins.

“Strike me once, and I will fill the village with music again. No more sorrow, no more confusion. You will be heroes, not traitors. All I ask... is that you be my drummers.”

The boys felt the pull. Their hands twitched, their hearts beating in sync with the forest drum. For a terrifying moment, Chukwudi *wanted* to strike it—wanted the weight of silence lifted, wanted to feel the joy of rhythm rush through his bones again.

But then he saw Obiora's pale face and remembered Ifeanyi's broken body.

“No,” Chukwudi whispered, forcing the words through gritted teeth. “We will not be your slaves.”

The forest shook with laughter, deep and mocking.

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"Slaves? No. Partners. Kings of rhythm, worshipped by all. Do not resist what you are meant to be."

The ground trembled. The drum-tree throbbed harder.

The Warning

Before they could run, a figure emerged from the shadows—staggering, thin, his body scarred with faint black veins.

It was Ifeanyi.

He raised a trembling hand. "Do not strike it," he croaked. "This drum... is stronger than the last. If you awaken it, it will not only bind Umunneochi. It will spread. From village to village, town to town. The whole land will dance until it dies."

Chukwudi's heart thundered. The spirit's laughter deepened.

"You cannot escape me. If you do not strike, someone else will. Rhythm is eternal. And silence... silence never lasts."

The boys stood frozen in the clearing, caught between the promise of peace and the shadow of destruction.

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And in that moment, the true war began—not between men and drums, but between rhythm and silence, within their very souls.

Chapter Twenty-Four

– The Drummer's Curse

For three days, the boys kept the forest's secret locked in their chests.

They did not speak of the hollow drum to Adaeze, nor to Nneoma, nor even to Obinna.

But the silence was not theirs alone.

The spirit had already sown its seeds.

The Strange Murmurs

In the market square, women began to hum without realizing it. Their lips moved, their feet tapped softly on the ground as though following a rhythm no one else heard.

At night, men in their huts woke sweating, their hearts pounding as if they had danced in dreams. Some swore they had heard drums echoing faintly in the distance, though the village had long destroyed every one.

The elders gathered, their faces pale with unease.

"It is as though the air itself remembers the beat," one

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muttered.

"Perhaps," another whispered, "the spirit is not gone."

Fear spread like wildfire.

The Boys' Burden

Chukwudi and Obiora felt the weight of guilt. They knew the truth, yet if they spoke it, who would believe them?

That night, Obiora whispered as they lay on their mat: "If we keep silent, the curse will grow. If we speak, they will blame us."

Chukwudi clenched his fists. "We must protect the village, even if they call us liars."

But even as he said it, doubt gnawed at him. Was silence protection—or betrayal?

The Spirit's Touch

On the fourth night, the spirit moved openly.

The children of the village began sleepwalking. One by one, they rose from their mats, eyes half-closed, and drifted towards the forest. Parents wailed and dragged

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them back, but still the little ones tried to wander off, drawn by an unseen call.

Obinna himself woke to find Ifunanya standing in the doorway, staring towards the trees.

"Ifunanya!" he cried, rushing to pull her back. Her body was cold, her lips moving silently.

When she awoke, she remembered nothing.

That same dawn, a sick goat was found dead in the path to the forest, its body twisted unnaturally, as though it had danced itself to death.

The people of Umunneochi trembled.

The Accusation

By midday, whispers had turned into open suspicion.

"It began when those boys came back from the forest!"

"Yes, Chukwudi and Obiora. Do they not hear what we do not hear?"

"Maybe they struck a drum and now bring curses upon us!"

The villagers gathered before Obinna's compound, restless, angry, demanding answers.

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Adaeze stepped forward, shielding her children. "Leave them! My sons are no witches."

But the crowd would not be calmed.

Then Chukwudi stepped into the open, his voice trembling but firm.

"If you want the truth, then hear it. The drum still lives—in the heart of the forest. The spirit has returned."

Gasps filled the air. Some crossed themselves. Others spat on the ground.

Nneoma's eyes widened. "The forest? Then it is true... the curse never died."

The elder Okonkwo, leaning on his staff, stepped forward. "Boy, if this is truth, then you have brought a heavy burden upon us. And if it is a lie, then you will pay dearly for sowing fear."

The villagers' eyes turned sharp, heavy with doubt.

And in that moment, the spirit's laughter echoed through the trees—low, mocking, unseen.

The curse was no longer hidden. It had entered the hearts of the people.

Chapter Twenty-Five

– The Gathering Storm

The days after Chukwudi's revelation were restless, heavy with suspicion.

The village no longer moved as one body; it was torn down the middle.

Division Among the People

One half of Umunneochi believed him.

They whispered in fear, gathered their children close at night, and begged the elders to act quickly.

"The boy speaks truth," they muttered. "The spirit has not left us. Can we not see it in the way our children walk in their sleep? In the hum that fills our ears even when no drum beats?"

The other half spat at the ground whenever his name was mentioned.

"He is cursed. He and his brother must have struck the forbidden drum. Why else would the spirit call only to them? If we drive them away, the curse will end."

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Old friends turned into strangers overnight. Families argued, neighbors accused one another. The market, once filled with laughter and banter, now carried an air of bitterness and watchfulness.

The Elders' Dilemma

The council of elders met beneath the great iroko tree. Okonkwo spoke first.

"If the boy is right, then we are doomed. No man can fight a spirit that is reborn."

But Elder Nwafor, his voice sharp with doubt, countered: "Or perhaps the boy is the spirit's vessel. To destroy the curse, we must destroy its bearer."

Gasps rippled through the gathering.

Adaeze, who had insisted on attending, rose with fire in her eyes.

"Touch my son, and you bring war with me! Have you so quickly forgotten who it was that warned you of the drums in the first place? Would you kill the same child because truth burns your ears?"

The elders fell into silence.

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Okonkwo sighed, leaning on his staff. "We cannot act in anger. But we must act. If this spirit rises again, the village will not survive."

The Spirit's Influence

That night, the spirit moved bolder than ever.

The hum in the people's heads grew into whispers. Voices, sweet and soothing, urging them to the forest. Some resisted, covering their ears, praying. Others trembled as their feet itched to walk towards the trees.

By dawn, three youths were missing. Their parents wailed in the square, pointing towards the forest. "They have gone to the drum! The spirit has taken them!"

Chukwudi felt his stomach twist. He knew this was the spirit's game—divide them, weaken them, lure them.

Obiora looked at him, pale with fear. "If more go missing, they will come for us. They already doubt us."

A Dangerous Suggestion

That evening, as the family sat in the compound, Obinna spoke with heavy words.

"We cannot wait for the elders to decide. If the spirit

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has made a new drum, then we must end it before more are lost.”

Nneoma shivered. “But to enter the forest again? The last time nearly destroyed you.”

Obinna’s jaw tightened. “Then we will not go as before. We will go with preparation. With fire. With prayers.”

Chukwudi’s heart pounded. He wanted to be brave, but fear clawed his chest. The spirit was growing stronger. He could feel it watching them, smiling through the shadows.

And as the moon rose that night, painting the land silver, he heard it again—faint but steady, deep in the forest:

“Dum... dum... dum...”

The storm was gathering.

Chapter Twenty-Six

– Into the Forest Again

The decision was made before dawn. Obinna, his sons, and a small band of men would enter the forest again—not as wanderers, but as hunters of a curse.

Preparations

The compound buzzed with tension. Nneoma ground bitter kola into paste, rubbing it on the boys' foreheads for protection. Adaeze prepared charms of palm fronds tied with red cloth, whispering ancient prayers she had learned from her grandmother.

"You must not fear," she told her sons, though her own hands trembled. "The spirit feeds on fear the way goats feed on yam leaves."

Obinna sharpened his machete in silence, the scraping sound echoing like a warning. Around him, the other men—Okeke, Udo, and the old hunter Nnamdi—tested their torches, binding dry palm fronds tight. Fire, they believed, could weaken even unseen spirits.

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When the sun rose, pale and weak through the harmattan haze, they were ready.

The Forest Path

The moment they stepped past the first line of trees, the forest swallowed them.

The air grew heavy, thick, as if unseen eyes pressed in from every side. The usual chirps of birds and rustling of animals were absent. Instead, there was silence—broken only by a low hum, like many voices breathing in unison.

Chukwudi gripped his torch tighter. “It knows we are here.”

Nnamdi spat on the ground. “Let it know. Let it fear us too.”

But even his bold words trembled.

The First Encounter

As they moved deeper, the hum shifted into a rhythm. A drumbeat. Soft, steady, pulling at their feet.

Suddenly, a figure stepped onto the path ahead. It was one of the missing boys—Nkem, the blacksmith's

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son. His eyes were glazed, his body swaying. Behind him, two other youths appeared, their movements stiff, as if controlled by invisible strings.

"They are the drummers now," whispered Obiora, his voice cracking.

Obinna raised his hand to stop the men. "Do not harm them—they are not themselves."

But the children's lips opened in eerie unison, and a deep, resonant "**Dum... dum... dum...**" escaped their throats. No drum, no hands striking wood—yet the sound filled the forest, shaking the leaves above.

The men clutched their ears, stumbling. The rhythm was inside their skulls, tugging at their minds.

Chukwudi dropped to his knees, his torch nearly falling. "Father! It's pulling me—"

Obinna grabbed him, shaking him hard. "Fight it! Remember who you are!"

The Shadow Beyond

Through the swaying children, deeper in the trees, a shape began to form.

It was not man, nor beast, but a figure woven of smoke

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and shadow, tall as a palm tree. Its chest pulsed like a drum, each beat sending waves through the forest.

The spirit was no longer hiding.

Obinna shouted, "Now! Light the torches!"

Flames roared to life, driving back some of the darkness. The children staggered, momentarily breaking their rhythm.

But the shadow only laughed—a deep, hollow sound that rattled the very earth.

"You return with fire," it boomed, "but fire only feeds the beat."

And as if to prove its words, the torches flickered violently, bending towards the spirit like servants bowing to a master.

Chukwudi's heart pounded.

For the first time, he realized: the spirit did not merely live in the drum.

It was the drum.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

– The Spirit's Song

The flames flickered madly, drawn to the shadow's chest where the beating pulsed.

Every strike of that drum-heart vibrated through the ground, shaking loose branches and sending cold waves down their spines.

The men clutched their torches, but their fire no longer felt like a weapon.

The Children's Chant

Nkem and the other youths swayed, their eyes still empty. Slowly, their voices rose, carrying a song no human mouth should sing.

It was not Igbo. It was not any tongue of men. The sound was deep, ancient, echoing like thunder trapped in a cave.

“Dum... dum... ka-ra... dum... dum... ka-ra...”

The rhythm grew faster, and as it did, the men began to stagger. Their arms felt heavy. Their thoughts blurred.

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Okeke fell to his knees, torch dropping from his hand.

"It— it is inside my head! I cannot stop hearing it!"

Nnamdi, the hunter, pressed both palms to his ears, roaring in defiance, but blood trickled down his nose.

The spirit's laughter rolled like a storm.

"You cannot fight song with silence. The beat is eternal."

Chukwudi's Struggle

Chukwudi's body shook, the drumbeat rattling his bones. He wanted to give in, to sway like the children, to let the sound carry him into nothingness.

But then his mother's words came back to him:

"The spirit feeds on fear."

He bit his tongue hard until the sharp taste of blood filled his mouth. Pain anchored him. He gripped his torch tighter, forcing his eyes to focus on the shadow's chest.

It was glowing—each throb of the drum-heart sending waves of light. And in the light, he saw something... wood.

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At the very core of the spirit's chest was a dark, polished drum. Not carved by men, but birthed from the spirit itself.

Chukwudi gasped. "Father! The drum—it's inside him!"

The Father's Stand

Obinna's eyes widened. For a moment, despair flickered across his face. How could they burn a drum that lived within a spirit?

But then he roared, lifting his machete high.

"Men of Umunneochi! Do not bow to shadows! Strike the heart! Strike the drum!"

He charged forward, torch in one hand, blade in the other. The others, though weakened, followed, their cries shaking the trees.

The spirit bellowed, a sound like a thousand drums colliding. Its smoky arms lashed out, sweeping men off their feet, but Obinna pushed through, fire blazing in his grip.

For a moment, flame touched the spirit's chest—
—and the forest shook.

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The children screamed, collapsing to the ground, their trance broken. The spirit recoiled, its laughter turning into a roar of rage.

"You dare burn the eternal beat!" it thundered.

A Deadly Choice

The torches flickered dangerously, bending towards the spirit again. One by one, they began to sputter out. Soon, only Obinna's flame remained, pressed close to the spirit's chest.

But the shadow was fighting back. The flame shrank, as if the spirit was swallowing it.

Chukwudi realized the truth:

One flame would not be enough.

The spirit's drum-heart could only be destroyed if they sacrificed all their fire together—every last spark.

But if they did, they would be left defenseless in the dark.

He looked at his father, whose arms trembled as he held the spirit back. Obiora's terrified eyes met his own.

"Chukwudi," Obinna grunted, his voice breaking under strain, "the choice is yours. Give me the fire... or save it."

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The boy's heart pounded. He could end it here—or lose everything.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

– The Last Flame

The forest seemed to stop breathing.
Every leaf, every root, every hidden creature was waiting
for Chukwudi's choice.

The flame in his hand sputtered weakly, its light dimmed
by the spirit's pull. His father strained before him,
holding the darkness at bay, his arms shaking. The other
men crouched in pain, their torches already
extinguished.

If this last flame died without touching the drum-heart,
then Umunneochi was lost forever.

The Boy's Decision

Chukwudi clenched his jaw, tears filling his eyes. His
father's words echoed in his ears:

"The choice is yours."

He looked at Obiora, his younger brother, shivering with
fear. He thought of his mothers, Adaeze and Nneoma,
waiting at home with hope clinging to their hearts. He

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thought of the missing children who had collapsed moments ago, weak but alive.

His hands stopped trembling.
He stepped forward.

“Take it, Father!” he cried, shoving the torch into Obinna’s hand.

Then, with a shout that tore his throat raw, he lifted his voice:

“ALL OF YOU! GIVE YOUR FLAMES TO HIM!”

The Last Fire

The men, groaning in pain, dragged themselves forward. Even with their torches dead, they still had embers smoldering at the ends of their sticks. One by one, they pressed them against Obinna’s flame.

It grew. Weakly at first—then brighter. Stronger. Until it roared with a heat none had ever seen, a fire white at its heart.

The spirit screamed. “No! You cannot undo the eternal song!”

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It lashed out with smoky arms, sending two men sprawling. But Obinna stood tall, the great flame in his hand like a sun in the night.

He turned to his son, meeting Chukwudi's eyes.
"Your courage lit this fire. Now pray it burns the truth."

Strike at the Drum-Heart

Obinna charged, roaring like a lion. The spirit's chest pulsed violently, trying to repel him. The children's chant rose again, their voices trembling with pain:

"Dum... dum... ka-ra... dum... dum... ka—"

But before they could finish, Obinna thrust the flame deep into the shadow's chest.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.
Then—

BOOM!

The forest exploded with light.
The spirit shrieked, its form unraveling like smoke in a storm. The drum within its chest cracked, splintered, and shattered into fragments of glowing wood that fell and dissolved into the soil.

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The sound of drums stopped.
The forest was silent once more.

The Silence After

Obinna collapsed to his knees, the torch falling from his hand and burning out against the earth. Chukwudi rushed to him, clutching his father's shoulders.

"Papa! Papa, speak!"

Obinna groaned, lifting his head. His face was pale, sweat dripping like rain. But he was alive.

Around them, the children stirred, their eyes clear again. They wept, clinging to one another, freed from the spirit's grip.

The other men rose slowly, battered but breathing. Nnamdi leaned on his spear, his old voice breaking. "It is... finished."

The Last Words of the Spirit

But just as relief settled in, a whisper crawled through the trees.

"You think you have ended me... but the drum is not

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mine alone. As long as men hunger for power, the beat will rise again..."

The voice faded into the soil, carried away on the wind.

The forest sighed, as though exhaling after holding its breath for centuries.

The Return

The men carried the weak children back to the village. Obinna limped between his sons, his hands resting on their shoulders for support.

When they emerged from the forest, the people rushed forward, gasping at the sight of their loved ones alive. Adaeze and Nneoma fell to their knees, tears streaming as they embraced their children and husband.

That night, the village did not sleep. Fires burned bright, songs of victory were sung, and offerings of thanksgiving were made.

But even in the midst of celebration, Chukwudi could not shake the memory of the spirit's last words.

The drum was destroyed... but its warning remained.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

– A Village Reborn

The dawn after the battle broke with a sky the color of soft clay, washed clean by the night winds. For the first time in many seasons, Umunneochi woke without fear. No strange drumming haunted the villagers' dreams. No child wandered aimlessly toward the forest.

Instead, laughter rang through the compound as families embraced children they thought lost forever.

The Return of Joy

Obinna sat outside his hut, leaning on a wooden staff. His body still ached from the struggle, but his spirit was lighter than it had ever been. His two wives, Adaeze and Nneoma, moved about him like a dance of balance.

Adaeze prepared a calabash of pepper soup to restore his strength, her movements calm, her eyes carrying a quiet pride.

Nneoma, never one to hide her feelings, sat beside Obinna with one arm draped over his shoulder.

"Hmmm," she teased, "you nearly left us to be widows."

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Do you know how the women at the market would have looked at us with pity?"

Obinna managed a weary smile. "If death had taken me, at least I would have gone knowing my wives would quarrel enough to keep my name alive."

Both women laughed, the sound carrying across the compound like birdsong. For once, their rivalry softened into shared relief.

The Village Council

That afternoon, the elders gathered beneath the iroko tree. The villagers crowded around, eager to hear the verdict of the council.

Elder Nnamdi, his staff of office planted firmly in the soil, spoke first.

"The forest has been purged. Our children are safe. But let us not forget—this evil was born not only of spirits, but of men. Long ago, greed and disobedience opened a door. It was we, the living, who made a drum for shadows to play."

Murmurs spread among the people.

Another elder added, "From today, no man shall enter the forest with selfish desire. Its heart belongs to the

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earth, not to us. We must teach our children respect, so that such darkness does not return.”

The crowd nodded, their faces solemn.

Then Nnamdi turned to Obinna, who stood with Chukwudi at his side.

“You, Farmer of Two Wives, have done what warriors feared to attempt. But it was not only your strength—it was the courage of your son, the unity of your household, and the trust of this community that won the battle. Remember this: no man saves a village alone.”

The people erupted in cheers, raising their hands toward Obinna and Chukwudi.

Chukwudi's Uneasy Heart

That night, while drums of celebration echoed across Umunneochi, Chukwudi slipped away to the edge of the village. He gazed into the dark forest.

Though the trees now stood silent, their branches heavy with dew, he could still hear the spirit's last whisper in his memory:

“As long as men hunger for power, the beat will rise again...”

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A shiver passed through him.

His father's hand rested gently on his shoulder. "You are restless, my son."

Chukwudi nodded. "Papa, what if the spirit was right? What if one day another drum is made, and the curse returns?"

Obinna looked into the forest, then back at his son.

"Then you will be ready. For the true drum is not wood and skin—it is the heart of the people. If we keep that drum pure, no spirit can touch us."

Chukwudi's eyes lifted, determination hardening within them. He would not only be a farmer's son. He would be a guardian of the village's memory.

The Village Sleeps

As the fires dimmed and the songs softened into the night, Umunneochi lay wrapped in a rare peace. Children slept soundly, elders spoke with hope, and the earth seemed to sigh with relief.

The farmer, his two wives, and his sons sat together under the stars, their laughter rising like sparks.

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The curse was broken.

But a new story was only just beginning.

Chapter Thirty

– The Legacy of the Farmer

The harmattan winds blew gently across Umunneochi as the seasons turned. The village had settled into a rhythm of peace, its scars healed by time and laughter. Fields flourished, streams ran clear, and the forest, once feared, stood quietly at the edge of the land like a sleeping giant.

For Obinna, the farmer with two wives, life became simpler. His farm thrived, the soil yielding more than enough to feed his household and share with neighbors. But what mattered most to him was not the harvest of yam and cassava, but the harvest of harmony within his home.

Two Wives, One Household

Adaeze and Nneoma had learned to live not as rivals but as pillars of the same house. Their differences remained, for fire cannot become water, but they found balance in their roles.

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Adaeze's wisdom guided the household's decisions, while Nneoma's lively spirit brought laughter even in hard times. Many in the village, once critical of Obinna's choice to marry two women, now marveled at the peace in his home.

"Perhaps," one woman whispered at the market, "it is not the number of wives that brings trouble, but the wisdom of the man who holds them together."

The Sons of Obinna

Chukwudi grew taller, his eyes sharper with thought and quiet strength. He became known among the youths as *onye oḡuḡu isi*—the thoughtful one. Whenever disputes arose, it was Chukwudi whose calm words soothed tempers.

Obiora, though still mischievous, began to channel his energy into hunting and farming, proving himself bold and dependable. The brothers, once shadowed by fear of the drum, now walked proudly as young men of the community.

The Final Council

One evening, under the glow of the moon, the council of elders summoned the village. The great iroko tree once again stood as witness.

Elder Nnamdi raised his voice:

“This village has survived a trial of spirit and man. Let us not forget the lesson—that unity is stronger than fear, and wisdom stronger than weapons.”

He turned to Obinna.

“Farmer of Two Wives, your household is a mirror for us all. You chose a life that many doubted, yet in your unity, we found strength. May your story guide generations.”

The villagers clapped their hands and sang praises, circling Obinna and his family.

The Farmer's Reflection

That night, as the village celebrated once more, Obinna sat quietly outside his hut. The stars spread like seeds across the sky. He thought of the battles fought, the tears shed, and the love that endured.

Adaeze came to sit beside him, her calm presence like a cool stream. “Your eyes are far away, husband.”

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He smiled faintly. "I was thinking... when I am gone, what will be remembered of me? That I farmed the land? That I had two wives? Or that I fought a spirit?"

Nneoma joined them, laughter dancing in her voice. "You will be remembered as the stubborn man who gave two women reason to quarrel every morning!"

All three burst into laughter, their voices carrying into the night.

The Legacy

Chukwudi, listening from the doorway, whispered softly to himself:

"No, Papa. You will be remembered as the man who taught us that family is the strongest shield, and that even the smallest household can save a whole village."

The wind carried his words away, as if sealing them into the heart of Umunneochi.

And so it was: the farmer and his two wives lived out their days not in riches or fame, but in harmony and respect. Their story, told and retold around firesides, became a parable for generations—of unity, of courage, and of the quiet power of love.

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✦ End of the Novel ✦

Thank you for taking your time to read my novel and learning from it.