

13 MOONS

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DYNASTY STUDIOS

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Content note: the opening depicts an execution.

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Prologue

“Liar! Liar!”

“Whore!”

“Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

The crowd’s words battered her as she tried to wake from what had to be a nightmare. But the moon-cooled earth beneath her knees was real. She had watched this ritual before and never imagined herself at the blade’s edge. From the crowd, an execution had looked like ceremony. From the block, it was only terror.

“We bring before you a liar, a whore, and she is not even one of us; she is a *slave*! What shall we do with her?” The Executioner raised his machete in the air.

“Kill her! Kill her!” The crowd echoed.

The Little Girl tried to speak, but the gag held a heated stone against her tongue. Only a whimper escaped. Her eyes pleaded with a crowd that had already decided not to read them.

“Whore!” a man screamed from the crowd before throwing a rock that connected with her forehead, causing her head to jerk backwards.

By then she was too frail to fight. Her body was weak, her spirit broken. She felt both numb and heavy at the same time. Her hearing deafened with a buzzing sound and her vision blurred to complete obscurity as the Executioner read the charges against her for the first time. Before he could finish, the crowd went wild cheering even harder for her head. Then as he was about to swing, she raised her head for one last time. In that moment she experienced a glimpse of clarity. At first she could only see the hate-filled eyes and hear the bloodthirsty screams. Then a strange silence greeted her ears, and rather than looking at them, she was looking past them.

Some faces were familiar. The tomato seller who always saved the firmest fruit for her. The raft paddler who once carried her across the river for free. The palm-wine tapper who called every child his own. Familiarity had not made them merciful. It had only made their cruelty intimate. In the Old King's court, nobody from the square had heard her case. Here, nobody asked to. Her mother used to say that miserable people sometimes borrowed relief from another person's pain. The Little Girl had never understood. Now she understood with her neck against wood.

No one had come to hear the truth. They had come for the instant in which another person's ruin might make their own lives feel bearable. Before the blade fell, she found one little boy in the crowd who was not cheering. When their eyes met, he lowered his head. Fear, weakness, shame—she would never know which.

Then the machete came down.

Her head struck the earth with a soft, final thud. For one suspended breath, even the crowd fell silent. Then the village roared.

Chapter One

The New Moon was Eyanka's name for the first full moon after the new rains, a night of hope and celebration. A thin rainy season foretold famine; abundant rain promised full barns. To court the favour of the sky goddess, the village marked that moon each year with sacrifice, music, and fire.

Huts stood open and empty. Smoke from roasting plantain drifted towards the square, where drummers tightened goat-skin heads over fire and women passed calabashes of peppered meat between dancers. Palm wine vanished almost as quickly as it was poured. Children wore chalk moons on their cheeks. Men who had quarrelled all season embraced as though one night of music could settle a year of debt.

Children folded themselves around the elders' stools. They wanted wars, monsters and kings who returned from death. What they received was a silence nobody had rehearsed. Thirteen rains had passed since the execution, yet the square still seemed to remember where the girl's blood had entered the earth.

"Dance well," the Mad Man called. "A debt collector is coming, and she does not accept palm wine."

"Papa, which debt?" asked a boy of nine rains.

"The debt inside his bottle," the elder said, waving the Mad Man away. But his laughter arrived late, and the children heard the delay.

"I know what I saw and believe it or not, you are all going to pay for the blood of the innocent."

For thirteen rains the Mad Man had repeated the same impossible testimony: after the beheading, while the storm emptied the square, a burned woman came for the child's body. Every retelling had made him easier to ridicule and harder to ignore.

Eyanka manufactured explanations because explanations were cheaper than guilt. Dogs ate the corpse. The storm carried it underground. The dead girl grew another head and escaped. Each version absolved the living.

“You all think I am crazy, perhaps it is this village that is crazy. I am telling you what I saw. I saw the ghost of a woman emerge to collect the Little Girl’s corpse. She appeared burned like she too had been killed in an execution. On her wrist I saw marks left by the ropes she had been bound with.” He motioned to his own wrists.

“You weren’t even born when this village had its last execution by fire!” an old man shouted.

“I know what I saw old man. And tonight I shall be vindicated. Children, just pray to the gods it isn’t one of you she comes for. Oh yes, she is coming. The burnt woman said she would.”

His eyes widened to inspire fear in the heart of the young.

“Thirteen rains of peace is what she gave us. A fair exchange for the life of the innocent we took.”

“Pay him no mind. Only the foolish challenge the words of elders. Now be gone! Let me teach these children something worth learning about.”

With that last dismissal, he was gone to where he came from, muttering indistinguishable words under his breath.

“Mad Man!”

“Dread head!” the children called out, mocking him as he left.

It wasn’t until the flames of the bonfire reduced to embers that the High Priest made his entrance with the village masquerade. It started with the sound of a powerful drum.

At the sound of the first stroke, children broke into a sprint to get off the walk path and village square. The adults hurried in their steps pretending to chase the children to safety while evading the square themselves. The masquerade runner appeared in the midst of the celebration in a frenzied dance, lashing out his koboko whip in the air. Anyone on his path or within the whip’s reach was asking for a good lashing. The drum grew louder as the masquerade got closer, and soon, other instruments followed.

The masquerade entered in raffia, bells and a painted wooden face, clearing the path with a whip that cracked above bowed heads. Children believed the mask could steal the spirit of anyone who met its eyes. Adults claimed to know better, yet none looked directly at it. Behind the dancer came the High Priest, carrying the same prophecy he carried every year: rain, harvest and a darkness described too vaguely to be proved wrong.

As custom demanded, the King arrived with his guards, the largest faction of the village army. When the march halted, he invited the soft-spoken Queen to deliver the annual address. She praised the village's accomplishments, the High Priest and the General, then announced that a seer had foretold the birth of a prince. The square erupted. The King smiled behind her and dismissed the parade with a slight nod.

It was only after the King turned his back on the crowd that the drinking and dancing could continue, even if poisoned by an underlying fear of an approaching darkness as predicted by the priest. By the end of the celebration, the square was deserted save a few sleeping drunkards too weak to find their way home. Silence befell the village and not long after, sleep followed.

The fisherman chose his canoe over his hut, as he did whenever drink made the earth feel too steady. The current rocked him beneath the moon. Near dawn, the canoe struck the bank once, twice, then again. Nobody heard him wake.

"He was right, the Mad Man was right!" The Town Crier banged on his gong as he shuffled and stumbled through every street in the village.

At sunrise, the canoe rested crooked against the reeds. The fisherman lay inside it without his head. Blood had dried beneath his fingernails, and deep scratches travelled along the wood towards the water, recording the last thing his hands had tried to do: hold on.

The Mad Man stood behind the gathering crowd. "Even a fool can carry the truth," he said. "The truth does not become foolish with him."

Red Moon Interlude

Part 1 of 6

For the slave-born and slave-made, the King's farm was a place of torment. Stories of beatings and murders circulated, but every investigation died quietly. At best, the royal family compensated slave owners with cowries or a share of the next harvest; at worst, it bullied them into silence. To Eyanka, a slave's life was worth less than a prisoner's, a criminal's or even the cattle the enslaved tended. Still, owners competed to rent their slaves to the King because royal labour paid better than domestic work. When those slaves came of age, they could be sold to the crown for the army or the farm.

Over the years, the enslaved learned the place Eyanka assigned them. The slave-born had never known freedom; the slave-made remembered it until punishment made remembering dangerous. In time, most yielded to the identity the village imposed upon them. The Little Girl had been enslaved at five. At thirteen, she knew no other way to name herself.

Chapter Two

By the next New Moon, Eyanka had learned the choreography of fear. Doors closed before sunset. Mothers called children home by name. Men sharpened machetes they privately knew could not cut a spirit. The square filled for the festival because absence looked like cowardice, not because anyone wished to celebrate.

After the Fisherman's death, the Mad Man was summoned to the King's court to tell the royal circle what he knew.

"Your Highness and the court, I can tell you nothing but what I saw and heard on that fateful night." He sipped out of the drinking horn.

He had not been granted a listening ear in so long and in many ways he had become used to being ignored. The sudden appearance of an audience for his gospel made him feel somewhat uneasy, especially considering that he had no idea what exactly they were asking of him.

"I saw the body of a woman approach the village square in the rain. Her flesh appeared burnt, her eyes empty. She carried the Little Girl's body and walked away. But not before she spoke to me. She said that we would know thirteen rains of peace for every rain the girl had lived, and after that, we would know the true meaning of fear and vengeance until the balance of justice was restored in the land."

The royal court was a group of old men believed to be ripe with wisdom, but on this occasion, they sat as clueless as newborns, eyes darting frantically with no aim to rest.

"Did she mention how this justice is to be restored? What does she want? Gold? Cowries? A life in return? Has she not already taken one?" one of the elders asked.

"I am afraid this is all I can tell you." He pressed his knuckles to his temple. The rest of the storm returned only as broken words, and whenever he

reached for them, drink washed them farther away. He swallowed more wine.

“Enough ghost stories,” the Executioner said. “Steel has settled every enemy Eyanka has ever had.”

Murmurs of agreement wrapped in fear covered the court. The suggestion was in line with the Eyanka way of doing things. When one couldn’t think or didn’t want to, there was always the option of reaching for the blade.

“Steel created this enemy,” the Mad Man replied. “You want to cure a cut with the blade that made it.”

“So what are you suggesting? That we sit with our hands crossed and prepare some words of appeasement for this vile beast?” The Executioner shot back.

The Mad Man wanted to say: surrender the crown, confess the lie, speak the girl’s name if anybody remembers it. But the Executioner’s hand rested on his machete. Courage visited the Mad Man often; it rarely stayed long enough to be useful.

The drums played louder than the previous year and persuaded nobody. Even the dancers kept watching the roads. Soldiers ringed the square with torches, their formation designed less to stop a spirit than to make fear look organised.

“I know some of you are afraid,” the King started with a speech, “but let us not forget who we are. We are the proud people of Eyanka and we will not cower for man or spirit.”

“Ehen!” a planted man shouted from the crowd.

The King carried on with words; promises and assurances punctuated by the occasional planned holler of agreement. Before his speech, the masquerade had been ushered in and as usual the High Priest gave his readings of good rain and approaching doom. Only this time it didn’t require much of an imagination to picture what this doom meant to the village.

As soon as the King departed, villagers scattered towards home as though a reaping had begun. In small clusters, they whispered about the crown’s part in the Little Girl’s execution, then fell quiet whenever another person approached. They mistook silence for safety. The dead girl had already learned to hear it as consent.

At last, the village fell silent, but darkness did not follow. Homes kept their night fires burning for fear of what shadows might grow without them. The Executioner joined his men on watch. He insisted that some vile animal had killed the Fisherman; a child-spirit was merely a Mad Man's tale made credible by coincidence. The village's surrender to superstition enraged him.

As the night passed, all eyes remained fixated on the moon, eagerly anticipating its disappearance with the light of day. The soldiers listened to the hooting of owls and the croaks of frogs hoping to hear something out of the ordinary. It came in the form of rain and somehow they knew this was far from a blessing from the goddess of the skies. It was frightening enough watching for a spirit walker with only a full moon for a lamp. The arrival of rain no matter how light did not help.

Unknown to them, she was there the whole time; like a shadow in the darkness, waiting for the last of lights to flicker into nothingness as it rained on street fire torches. That moment came when the Executioner excused himself from his station to ease his bladder. He had considered easing himself right there, in the middle of the street, but he thought it might suggest he was afraid to go alone. The rain had come to a stop. He excused himself to the back of a nearby hut where he was away from sight but still within earshot. After a look over his shoulder, he relieved himself as fast as he could squeeze.

At first, he did not understand. Fog descended and swallowed the path. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, but the whiteness only thickened. Cold raised gooseflesh along his arms.

"Ey, Eyy! Can you see this?" he called out to the other watchers.

There was no reply. Instinctively, he retied his wrapper and then reached for his machete immediately.

There was no one to swing at. His eyes darted in every direction. He saw nothing. This had to be all in his mind. He willed his spirit to break the spell but somehow he knew he was only grasping at straws. The Executioner fought hard against it, but a lot of him knew he was very afraid. He should have stayed with the others at the station. It was too late for regrets now.

A headless little girl emerged from the fog. Her steps were slow and purposeful. He tightened his grip on the machete and fought the instinct to run.

She kept coming. At arm's reach, he swung. The blade passed through her as though her body were made from the mist itself. He swung again, then again. By the time he understood that escape was his only weapon, the fog had already closed behind him.

In the mist, more figures of headless little girls appeared accompanied by a wailing sound that felt like it blared from inside his head.

He dropped the machete and covered his ears, but the sound had already become pain. It drove him to his knees. He screamed, yet the fog swallowed every cry. Warm liquid gathered in his palms.

“No, no...No!”

He examined his palms to realize they were covered in blood. That was when he felt the coldness on his shoulder. To her touch, his body responded with complete paralysis giving in to her every control. He struggled with every fibre in his being but at most he could only afford to clench his muscles and grit his teeth. A wetness at the back of his ears followed and somehow he knew he did not want to turn to meet his fate.

“Shouldn't he be back by now?” one of the watchers asked.

The man the Executioner had left in charge ordered two other men to go and check up on him. When they arrived, for a second, they stood in a trance—taking in the horror that unfolded right before their eyes. The Little Girl turned to face them, like an animal briefly distracted from its feeding. From the stare of snake-like eyes on her materialized phantom head, they could still feel the stare from her severed body. Between a set of scattered canines protruding from tightly clenched jaws, chunks of the Executioner's flesh dripping red with blood hung down to her chest. Completely uninterested by their interruption, she turned back to the business of chewing, gripping hard on his hair to hold him steadier.

His body convulsed with every bite. The guards knew there was no saving him. They sounded the battle horn and advanced, praying help would arrive sooner rather than later. At striking distance, they rained their blades upon her. She did not so much as flinch. No one dared seize her. Reinforcements arrived and joined the useless assault while she continued working through the Executioner's neck.

When she was done chewing, she ripped the head off the skeletal socket with beastly strength and held it by the hair. The attackers retreated in fear, watching her closely. She turned to them, then stood motionless with the Executioner's head in her hand like a trophy she had won.

"What do you want?" one of the men managed to ask after fighting a stutter to get the words out.

Without as much as a word, she turned around and began to walk away. Right before their eyes she walked into the mud wall of the hut the Executioner had been urinating on. It was the last they saw of her; at least for the night they lost the Executioner.

Chapter Three

After the Executioner's death, disbelief became bad manners. Witnesses told the story until every listener could describe the sound of teeth on bone. The details changed; the terror did not.

The King tried to maintain a sense of calm and normalcy, but no amount of free palm wine could lift the tension in the air. Through the bonfire and the wild beating of drums, the stench of impending death hung in the air.

Who would it be this time?

While the rest of the village was distracted by the pretence of celebration, the King met with his council.

"She cannot be killed by our blades," said one of the councilmen.

"A net," one councilman said. "Weighted at every corner."

"She walked through a wall." The General did not raise his voice. "What, exactly, will your net hold?"

"We are all doomed! We are all doomed!" One man blurted in panic.

"Silence!" barked the King.

The room fell quiet. All this time the King had been waiting for the High Priest to speak but he had said nothing.

"High Priest, what do you suggest we do? Or are you not the man to speak on matters of the worlds beyond?"

The High Priest cleared his throat and bought himself three breaths. His authority depended on appearing to remember what the gods had neglected to tell him.

"We must..."

"He has nothing to offer! We cannot trust anything he says," the General cut in.

"Silence! Let him speak," the King commanded.

The High Priest avoided the new General's eyes as he spoke. The General was not one to trust anything he could not verify for himself. In his opinion, the words of the High Priest were no more than figments of the man's own imagination. He watched him begrudgingly.

"I have prepared ten charms," the High Priest said. "Once she wears flesh, your blades will find it."

"And how are we supposed to find her in the first place?" a councilman asked.

"I suppose you expect us to march right into the forest," the General said.

The High Priest said nothing.

The King sat in silence. The Executioner's death had brought the darkness to his doorstep. If the moon reaper had come for the man who swung the blade, then her killings were not random—and the King had to be somewhere on her list. He would stop her from entering Eyanka, even if it meant sending his warriors into Ingiga Forest.

"General, you will take the charm from the High Priest and you will lead the charge into the forest. We must get to her before she gets to us."

The General sought the gaze of the Priest but it was not forthcoming.

"With all due respect my King, we don't even know if these charms will work," he protested.

"Do you doubt the power of the gods? The gods that have kept you and your forefathers before you," the High Priest countered.

The General smiled without warmth. "Good. You will stand beside me and watch the charm work."

All eyes were now on the High Priest. It was time for him to prove himself. A faded picture of the beheading from so many years ago flashed before his mind, and with it; a shudder he could not resist.

"Very well then, have it your way," the High Priest accepted. He was shaking with fear to the core of his being, but he would be dead before he would let the people that believed in him see his fear.

The King rose from his throne. "Then it is decided. I am counting on you," he moved his eyes to the General and then the High Priest, "both of you."

Without another word the King and his personal guards left the council meeting and everyone else followed. Before the General made his way out, he stopped by the High Priest.

“For your sake, I hope the gods are in your favour. Because if you are wrong about this, I will kill you long before she gets the chance to. I promise you this.”

When the celebration was over, silence befell the village. The streets were barren to even the presence of livestock. All the men slept on the doorsteps inside their huts in their bid to protect their family. Most didn’t even sleep at all but stayed up with whatever weapon they could fashion. Of course the stories held that steel was of no consequence to the reaper, but the alternative of waiting empty handed was not an option for most. At the very least, they wanted to die fighting.

The High Priest true to his word did have an assortment of charm bracelets prepared for a ten-man team.

“I guess one of you will have to stay back. There is only enough for ten and the High Priest is coming with us on this one,” the General said, smiling in the priest’s direction. The fear of death was now apparent in his eyes despite his best efforts to hide it.

“Is there a problem, High Priest?” the General inquired.

“You should learn to watch your tongue General.” The Priest cautioned.

“You have nothing to worry about. If this works, I will revere you as long as there is breath in my body, blood in my veins.”

The High Priest handed out the charms before fastening one around his own wrist.

“We have nothing to fear. We must only make sure we strike first,” the High Priest said.

The General grabbed a spare sheathed machete from his waist and handed it to the High Priest.

“Hopefully you won’t need this, but then again, you never know.”

The General turned to his men.

“Let’s go,” he pointed at the soldier without a charm, “actually you will come with us, but stay outside the forest. If things start to go wrong, you will

sound the horn as an alarm.”

“How will I know if things are going wrong?” he asked.

“Even a deaf man does not have to be warned of death when war breaks out.”

The forest was strangely cold and misty all year round. The croaks of frogs and hooting of owls broke the silence with the occasional rustle of leaves as bats flew in and out in search of fruits to eat.

“No matter what happens, we do not break formation,” the General said. The group of nine formed a circle with their backs to each other. It was the only way of making sure they had eyes in all directions at all times. The High Priest was allowed to stay in the centre for his own safety. The light from their torches didn’t illuminate much, but it was better than nothing.

“Ahhh, my...” The soldier never got to finish his sentence. Before they could turn around to see what had caused him to scream, he was already gone.

“Where did he go?” one soldier asked, swinging his torch around wildly.

“Focus! No time for that now,” the General barked.

They swung their gaze to every conceivable corner of the forest but found nothing.

“She’s in the...”

She took the second body.

By then panic had set in way too much for them to maintain formation. The soldiers broke rank and began to swing their machete aimlessly, waving their torches around in search of the unseen enemy.

“She’s in the ground!” one soldier yelled as he noticed a certain pattern where his comrades had been standing.

The others began to frantically stab the earth with their machetes but the efforts were at best wasteful. After the initial wave of panic was over, they settled into their fears and readied their mind for the worst.

The earth opened beneath the first soldier. His head rose through the leaves before the rest of him understood he was dead. Another head surfaced behind them. The formation collapsed—not because the soldiers lacked courage, but because courage requires somewhere to stand.

“She knows we have this charm! She won’t even let us hit...”

Then she allowed them to see her: a child-shaped absence, darkness breathing where a face should have been. She reached into the nearest soldier’s chest. His ribs opened around her arm. When she withdrew her hand, his heart came with it.

The General had hoped for a battle of guts and glory. He would have to wait for another day.

“Retreat! Retreat, now!”

Like a shapeshifting mass of darkness, she swept towards the High Priest and sank her teeth into his right arm. The General swung with all his strength, landing his machete against the side of her neck. She turned and released her prey. It gave him just enough time to seize the High Priest and run.

“Retreat, retreat!”

Only outside the forest did they count themselves. The watcher was gone. The charms remained bright around their wrists, beautiful and entirely useless.

Red Moon Interlude

Part 2 of 6

The village celebrated the New Moon; the slaves worked as usual. With sowing close, their owners would not risk palm wine or dancing. The quarters received only an extra ration of cassava. The Little Girl served as the evening's entertainer, imitating the Prince's pompous posture with her chest thrust forward and the manliest stride she could manage.

"Slave! Now, to my room..." She waited for laughter to ensue but instead she was greeted with silence.

"Are you deaf?" she pointed at her right ear, "I said, to my room, now!" the silence only intensified. It was at this moment she knew something was wrong. From the frozen looks on their faces she didn't have to turn around to realize someone was standing behind her, someone that would not have found any of this funny at all. Someone in the presence of whom the slaves were too afraid to be caught laughing. There was only one person it could be. Her heart sank in fear.

"So you are the funny one?"

Keep reading

The rest of the book

Blades cannot cut her. Charms cannot hold her. Every New Moon, Eyanka loses another head. Read on to learn what happened when the laughter stopped, and why a thirteen-year-old slave came back for the village that cheered her death.

The full novella, with its full-cast audiobook and read-along: ₦2,500. Coming soon to Dynasty Studios.