

# SHIGIDI

AND THE BRASS HEAD  
OF OBALUFON

BOOKS

PROPER

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TALABI



MASOBE

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For my mother, Sola, who left us too soon.

Thank you for your love and your words and for letting me help  
you with your theology studies all those years ago.

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## CHAPTER 1

*Northumberland Street, London (Spirit-side), England | July 5th, 2017 | 04:40 a.m.*

So, there he was, barely conscious in the back of a black cab being driven down the Haymarket road on the spirit-side of London by a man who died seventy years ago, when Nneoma finally told Shigidi that she loved him.

He would have laughed if he wasn't already half past dead.

The driver downshifted gears and swerved the hackney carriage so sharply and violently that the two left-side tires lifted off the ground. Shigidi lost his balance on the plush leather seat and toppled over into her thighs, pressing the open wound where his arm used to be and leaving an ugly red stain on her lovely blue dress. A smear of blood, clay, and spirit-particles. The contact made every muscle in his body contract. He felt like he was being torn apart from within, as if his insides were being separated from each other by an angry, pain-shaped animal. He was forced to lift his head out of her lap to shout out some of the hurt. The sound that came out of him was strained, strident, and strange. It was a sound he didn't recognise, even though it was not the first time he had screamed out in agony.

The spike of pain cleared just enough for him to stop screaming. *I don't know how much longer I can hang on to what little consciousness I have left.*

Bright light was spilling in through the windows, accompanied by a sound like the beating of the old Oyo empire war drums. It was almost funny because he had once used those same fearsome sounds as inspiration a long time ago, when the Ooni of Ife had sent him to give nightmares to six of his enemies. He was no longer a nightmare god, but he still remembered what it was like to weave the disparate myriad threads of deep-seated personal fears into a tapestry of terror and pain and uncertainty. And he still knew what it felt like to be caught inside such a web, in a nightmare, desperate to wake.

*Everything about this feels like a nightmare.*

In the blur of movement and disorientation, he caught a glimpse through the rear window. The sky was a maelstrom of thick, neon-edged clouds and constant flashes of electric-white lightning set against a pitch-black sky full of thick, dark clouds.

*No god could hope to reign over such wild spirit-sky.*

Down on the ground, four bronze horses with flames for eyes were galloping madly behind them, leaving a trail of broken asphalt, sparks, and fire in their wake. A large angry figure rode behind the horses, driving them forward with vicious purpose. A bronze rope ran all the way to the horses' strained throats and was wound tightly around the imposing figure's forearm, his feet braced in the back half of a crudely bisected grey sedan, giving chase in a makeshift chariot.

Shigidi's vision swam. The glare from the horses' flaming eyes became nothing more than one afterimage superimposed on a million others that danced on his irises, but he could tell that their pursuers were fast—faster than any flesh-and-blood horses could



ever hope to be—and drawing closer. But their cab driver was supposed to know the spirit-side of London better than anyone else, living or dead—or kind of both—and so Shigidi hoped that knowledge would be enough to get them to the rendezvous point before dawn. Before the life leaked out of him completely.

*I don't want to die in a foreign spirit land.*

Just then, the driver swung the wheel wildly, forcing the car to swerve right, barely missing two ghosts in long grey frocks. The cab careened down a short flight of cobblestone stairs before reconnecting with an actual road and accelerating again. Shigidi fell back down into his lover's lap, and his head bounced against the car door so hard he feared for a moment it had cracked open. His vision went blank, and he wasn't sure if it was because he had closed his eyes or if the impact had damaged something in his head, but he didn't really care. Everything hurt.

"Careful!" She shouted at the driver as she pressed her hand into Shigidi's and pulled his head into her bloody bosom.

"Sorry! I'm doing my best here, luv," the driver called back, "but in case you haven't noticed, we are being chased by four living statues and one pissed-off giant."

She ignored the driver and whispered into Shigidi's ear, "Hold on, my darling. I love you. Do you hear me? I love you. Just hold on. Everything will be okay. We are almost there."

Stunned, he forced his lead-heavy eyelids open and looked up into her large, wet eyes shimmering with a glaze of tears and the reflection of bright yellow spirit-particles. He wanted to embrace her and tell her he loved her too, the way he'd always imagined he would when she finally said the words to him, but he was short one arm and his mouth couldn't form the words. His tongue felt swollen and numb in his mouth, saturated with the sharp taste of iron and clay. He could still hear her; he was still mostly there, but

her voice sounded woolly and far away, and the galaxy of blurry lights reflected and refracted around him were becoming too bright. He could barely feel his arm or his legs or his face or his anything anymore.

*I guess my time is running out even faster than I thought. He hacked out a bloodstained cough. But it's not too bad. I suppose there are worse ways to die than in the arms of someone you love.*

A force slammed into the vehicle with a deafening sound like an explosion made of other explosions. The driver let out a primal scream that Shigidi could barely hear above the cacophonous violence of metal crunching against metal, the shattering of glass, the screeching of rubber on asphalt. In that moment, he knew they were done for.

He focused on the thing that mattered most to him—her. His eyes remained fixed on her face as the world around them turned into a chaotic galaxy of smoke and metal and glass. And then, when he could barely see her anymore, he shut his eyes against the army of white lights invading his consciousness and braced himself for what he was sure would be the final, endless fall into nothing.

*I love you too.*

*And I'm sorry, for everything.*

*This is not how I thought this would end.*

## CHAPTER 2

### Three Days Earlier.

*Perhentian Kecil Island, Terengganu, Malaysia | July 2nd, 2017|*  
*08:47 a.m.*

The beach was beautiful in the bright light of late morning. Powdery white sand hugged the arc of the island, transforming through low surf into turquoise crystal where it kissed the water. A widely spaced succession of small, brightly coloured boats—mostly fiberglass utility models and a few wooden long-tails with equally colourful sashes draped around their prows—rocked gently in the shallow water. They were tethered to the beach by a sparse web of coloured synthetic fibre ropes and rusty metal anchors. A lovely sprinkle of reflected colours danced on the edge of the turquoise like it was bleeding rainbows. Beyond the beach line rose a lush green island. An array of bold, brown wooden bungalows, perched on the elevated rocks, peeked out of the forest like curious children.

There was a smattering of young people up and down the beach; mostly tanned Europeans and quiet South-East Asians in their twenties and thirties, lying on plastic beach chairs under colourful parasols or under the sun on the sand. Around them were the usual debris: seaweed, cigarettes, seashells, beer cans, and

the charred remnants of a bonfire from the previous night's fire dance.

Shigidi and Nneoma stood out on the ribbon of beach, and he was keenly aware of it. They were a pair of sable-skinned specimens, their bodies sitting still, side-by-side in the sand as the white surf washed over their feet never going beyond their knees. It had taken him a while to get used to the looks they drew in this part of the world, but Nneoma always seemed comfortable everywhere. She was leaning back on the sand in a red bikini, her torso propped up on her elbows. He was hugging his knees to his heavily muscled chest as he inhaled the salty smell of the water and watched it wash in and out like the coral bay itself was breathing. The roar of the surf flicked at the brittle silence that had settled between them since they first camped out there, at dawn.

"She's been staring at you for fifteen minutes," Nneoma whispered, her eyes flicking to her left to indicate the person in question.

Shigidi swivelled his head, eyes hidden behind his sunglasses, to see a tall, toned, and tattooed woman who looked to be in her late thirties sitting on a pink beach towel and trying her best to pretend she wasn't looking at him. He grunted.

"Maybe you should buy her a drink. Say hello. We could take her to our chalet later tonight and find out what her spirit tastes like." Nneoma said it casually, like she was asking him what he would like for breakfast, her voice still low, but clear.

"Hmm. Maybe we should take it easy for a while," Shigidi said, remembering the blond German man whose bold, adventurous spirit they'd just shared a few days ago, after a drawn-out seduction back in Hanoi, on their way back from Ha Long Bay. "Maybe we should just leave the mortals alone for a while and enjoy each other's company."

When they'd first started their partnership, Nneoma had indulged in human spirits sparingly, preferring to play games with potential prey for days or even weeks, and consuming them only when she needed to, or occasionally when she spotted someone being abusive or abrasive. She had her own arcane sense of justice and fairness which he was still figuring out. But ever since they had incurred a debt to Olorun, chairman of the board of the Orisha Spirit Company, for saving their lives, Nneoma had changed. She'd become insatiable. Reckless. She didn't need the spirits, but she was persistent—almost aggressive—in consuming them. Like she was using the urgency of the hunt and the high of spirit consumption to hide something.

"Maybe we shouldn't become boring," Nneoma retorted. Shigidi raised his head, surprised at her sudden sharpness.

"Boring?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted that the tattooed woman, whose stare had started all this, was gone. Her beach towel was still on the sand, its pink flamingo patterns now rumpled.

She said, "Oh. You know what I mean. I am a succubus, you're a retired nightmare god. We are anything but normal. We need to keep our spirit-particles crackling, keep doing things that excite us."

"We already excite each other enough," Shigidi said, but deep down, he wasn't so sure. He had hoped she would agree, but she just sat up on the sand, straightened her back, and flipped her long, braided hair over her shoulder. So, he added a hesitant, "Don't we?"

"I'm just saying, I've been doing this much longer than you have, darling, and I know how easy it is to get bored when you have most of eternity to look forward to," she said. "And boredom can lead to bad decisions."

He looked down at the white sand, feeling the gentle heat of

the rising sun against the dark surface of his perfectly smooth bald head, before responding. "Attachment isn't always bad. Besides, eternity with someone you love cannot be boring."

"Sure," she agreed, "As long as you work to keep things interesting. And to be interesting, they have to keep changing, you know? I mean, think about the most enjoyable thing in the world. The thing you enjoy doing the most."

His eyes drifted down her body and she caught the motion, acknowledging it with a laugh.

"Even sex. Imagine sex with the same person, forever. No matter how wonderful it is, how compatible you are as partners, even if neither of you age, or change, eventually it will get boring. It may take a year or two or ten or a hundred, perhaps even a thousand if you're really creative, but it will. Eventually. Unless you can find a way to make it new every time. So that there is always something to look forward to. That's all I'm saying. The humans offer us endless possibilities and permutations as we can play with them and then consume their spirits together. It's fun. It's exciting. It's interesting, isn't it?"

This was the third time she had made some variant of this argument to him, but he knew it was her way of avoiding the real question. Even though she'd been the one to seek out his companionship, the one who'd made the offer and drawn heavily on her power to make him her partner, she always held him at an emotional distance. First, she'd been preoccupied with teaching him the skills he needed to exist independently, as a freelance spirit, with her. Now she was diluting the time they spent together with seductions and consumptions. They were freelance spirit entities, free of the schedules and objectives and constraints that deities in the employ of the larger spirit-companies had to deal with, but Nneoma was obsessively consuming a new spirit or

two every other day, like she was a spirit company employee with unreasonably high quarterly or yearly targets to meet.

“It’s fun, yes, but there has to be time and space for a couple to just be a couple. We can be interesting together,” he said.

She rolled her eyes and waved her sharply manicured, long and slender fingers at him. “This conversation is pointless, darling. Let’s not make this into more than it is. Do you want that girl’s spirit or not?”

Shigidi clenched his jaw. He suspected that having revealed the depth of his love for her, he had exposed something raw in their partnership, some deeper need or fear that she didn’t want to confront. There was no other way to interpret her actions. She’d been avoiding his attempts to spend more time alone with her, obsessively focusing on the tasks they had to perform to pay off their debt to Olorun, or wildly throwing herself into feeding on spirits like they were about to go out of stock.

He blurted out the question before he could stop himself. “Do you love me, Nneoma?”

The line of her mouth tightened, and she glared as though she was angry at him for asking the question. He held her gaze, despite a mounting fear that he’d overplayed his hand, and that she’d say “no” just to regain control of the situation.

The surf continued to lick at the new strained, silence between them. And then they heard a deep, low laughter. They turned together to see where it was coming from.

An old man in a flowing purple dashiki and matching trousers, who looked even more spectacularly out of place than they did, had replaced the tattooed woman on the pink flamingo pattern beach towel. He was laughing gently, deepening the crease lines that radiated from his eyes and bordered his broad nose and mouth. He watched them with a cool-eyed confidence, like he expected the

world around him to bend to his will, as he toyed with a reddish-brown kolanut. His skin shone fiercely like polished iroko wood in the early sunlight, and the thick grey beard covering his chin was only a few inches longer than his perfectly groomed afro.

Shigidi lowered his head out of habit and sighed again, deeper and more audibly now. Nneoma drew in a breath. The old man looked different from the last time they had seen him, but there was no doubt. They both knew exactly who had come looking for them.

“Olorun,” Shigidi said as he looked up. “We were having a private discussion.”

Olorun seemed to have drifted closer to them on the pink flamingo towel. Shigidi could have sworn that the tattooed woman wasn't nearly as close.

“I know, I know. I can see that you two are having a little, what do they call it, ehh . . . couples' spat, *abi* lovers' quarrel,” Olorun replied with a smile that constantly threatened to morph into a laugh. “Could it be the age difference? Dating older women is not easy, my boy. Or maybe vacations are not so good for your love life, eh? Too much free time?”

“That's none of your business,” Nneoma snapped.

Her candour shocked Shigidi. He would never get used to the way she spoke to elder gods, though he supposed it made sense. She had known most of them since they were little more than abstract concepts first made manifest. Shigidi, however, only came to know most of them long after, and some like Olorun, only as his boss's boss.

Still, the smile on the old god's face didn't falter.

“Rude,” Olorun said, “but true. Very true indeed. So, lovebirds, let's talk about my business then, eh? I have a special, urgent job for you. You have both done very good work so far, in Singapore