

THE LIES OF THE  
**AJUNGO**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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To my parents,  
Oseyi Mike Utomi and Stella Odalomhen Uwaibi-Utomi,  
who journeyed bravely beyond their City of Lies,  
shared generously the water they found,  
and prepared me for my own journey  
through the Forever Desert.

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# 1

THERE IS NO WATER *in the City of Lies.*

There hasn't been for as long as any can remember. The Greatmamas tell stories about the Fever, when not a single cloud was seen for years and even the cacti puckered and died. Breezes became natural disasters, stirring up enough fine, choked sand to blind the city for days. Mamas drank the blood of their children to fend off thirst, only to die anyway; too late they learned that blood was no substitute.

To the north, the Ajungo Empire had water like sky. They drank their fill, bathed daily, planted seeds and watched them grow into trees fat with fruit. Orulu, oba of the City of Lies, pleaded with the Ajungo for aid, but the Ajungo were sworn to selfishness. In exchange for water, the Ajungo demanded the tongues of every citizen of the City of Lies. It was a twofold price, a price of blood and a price of history: an untongued people cannot tell their story.

But neither can the dead.

So Orulu paid the price. All the city's citizens—everyone thirteen years and older—had their tongues cut away by hot blades, dumped into wagons, and shipped across the continent. In exchange, water was given, but not enough for the city to recover. Only a trickle. Just enough to keep the people of the City of Lies alive. Just enough to make it worth the price.

That was when the Ajungo renamed the city. Those old enough to remember the city's original name had no tongues to speak, and those young enough to speak had no memory.

Orulu himself, still in his youth, undertook a journey. He left with a promise to return a hero. He would traverse the Forever Desert—braving its scorching heat, monstrous beasts, and roaming Ajungo killers—in hopes of finding another people that could come to their aid. But when he finally found another empire and told them of the Ajungo's betrayal, they did not believe; who would trust the leader of a city named for deceit?

So Orulu returned, but he was no hero.

*There are no heroes in the City of Lies.*

Generation after generation, Orulu watched from the high towers of the Palace of Lies as wagons were loaded with the tongues of his people.



Eventually, in his final years, he assembled his people for an emergency address. They gathered in the town square, a wide expanse that had long ago been a beautiful field where children had played and adults had napped, heads laid against soft grass. Now it was just low dunes of ankle-deep sand that scorched the nose with each breath.

Looking upon his weak, dehydrated people, Orulu made a plea. He called on the city's children, those young enough to still have their tongues. He besought them to roam wide and far, to find a new land with water, where they could build a new city, begin a new history.

It would only take one, he told them. Not an act of heroism, but a stroke of luck. One child who could stumble into the right valley or come across a friendly face. Even a child deemed a liar could find someone to trust her, Orulu believed.

Hundreds of years passed. Orulu and his daughter and his daughter's daughter all ruled and died and no water was ever found. Children left, but none returned. For most, the task was simply too much. Beyond the city walls, the Forever Desert was as dry and unforgiving as a dead man's heart—no place for a child. For others, the quest was a selfish one, a chance to escape the drought and tongue-

cutting that awaited them at home, to find a new land where they could live. In either case, children were lost, never to be seen again.

And all came to understand: *There are no friends beyond the City of Lies.*

Soon those children who proclaimed they would attempt the royal quest and seek out water came to be viewed with both pity and suspicion. Everyone knew they would fail, and they did by the thousands. Big and small, clever and foolish, in the heat of day and the chill of night, each child was lost to the Forever Desert, never to return.

Then there was Tutu.

\* \* \*

Tutu had never liked school.

Not because of the teachers or the lessons—within the walls of their one-room schoolhouse, where Madam Oda taught history and math and science, he felt peace. But before class and after, when it was just him and the other students, he struggled to remember why he came to this horrible place.

*You must learn.* He could see his mama's fingers signing in his memory. *Only by learning can you free us.*

“Tutu, how is your mouth?” his classmates asked in near unison, giggling.

They'd been asking the same question every morning for weeks.

"It is fine," he said, keeping his eyes ahead. He just had to weather their taunts until Madam Oda arrived.

"Your tongue does not hurt?"

Though he was smaller than his classmates, he was a year older. In three days it would be his thirteenth birthday, which meant he would be cut. His mouth felt cold at the thought of it, and an uneasiness swam in his stomach. It was scary, of course, to think of the pain. Or to think he would never taste his mama's cooking again. But it was scariest of all to think that he hadn't learned enough. In three days he'd be tongueless, removed from school and put to work mining iron or at some other such labor.

He couldn't even free himself, much less the whole city.

"If your tongue hurts, we can cut it for you."

"It is fine," he repeated. Madam Oda had never been this late. Something was wrong.

"Will you cry when they cut you, Tutu?"

"How much blood do you think you will make?"

"Maybe your tongue will get infected and you will die."

“Will you cry?”

“Cry, cry, cry!”

He knew how much they wanted him to cry, but he always denied them. *Tears are precious*, his mama always said. *Don't waste them on your enemies. Save them for your friends.*

Still, Tutu's eyes were beginning to sting and the first tears were clouding together when Madam Oda swept into the room, her normally serene eyes panicked, her thin cheeks even more sunken than usual.

*Tutu!* she signed, the shaking in her fingers conveying meaning enough. *You must go.*

His classmates hushed. Tutu looked at her, confused. “Why, Madam?”

*Your mama.*

★ ★ ★

Outside Tutu's square, sheet iron home, the neighbors stood in a somber half circle.

“Mama?” he called.

As each person in the crowd became aware of his presence, they turned to look at him, pity plain on their faces. They parted for his approach, revealing his mama splayed out on the desert floor. She was brushed in sand, as if she'd been there long enough

for the wind to start burying her. Her eyes were closed.

Tutu walked carefully toward her, telling himself that she was only pretending. But when he knelt beside her and saw that her lips were bone dry, her cheeks sharp and bloodless, her eyelids so thin that her veins bulged all along them, he knew the truth. It was dehydration. “Blood drought.”

He looked around at his neighbors, at their drawn faces and taut skin. Their swollen ribcages and bent backs. He understood why they’d left her lying there. The drought had been bad for the last week, and many of them were especially weak. When water was low and thirst was high, it was risky to waste energy helping others.

He understood. But he hated them all the same.

The taunts of his classmates had only ever made him feel sad. Lonely. This made him feel angry. An anger so dark and miserable that he froze as it passed through him, not sure what would happen if he moved.

“Tutu . . .” someone said in a calm, comforting voice.

But he ignored it. The only thing he wanted from any of them was for them to help his mama. But they’d refused. They’d made it clear that they

didn't love him or his mama. That if he didn't protect her, no one else would.

He dragged his mama out from under the sun and their neighbors' pitying gazes and into their cramped one-room home. Even without help, and even as small as he was, his mama had lost so much weight that it wasn't difficult for him to sit her up against the back wall. From the coolest corner of their house, he retrieved their iron saucer of water. He knew she had chosen to pass out and save the water for him rather than drink it herself, but he refused to watch her grip on life slip away.

Tutu tilted his mama's head back, tapped her jaw down, and dribbled a bit of water over her lips and onto her tongue. He watched as the moisture seeped away, then he continued trickling the water in until her eyes fluttered open and rolled in delirium.

Their meager water was almost finished. It wouldn't last another day, and there was no guarantee of when more would come. His mama wouldn't be the first person to die of thirst in the City of Lies.

He had to get more.

He could try to steal some from his neighbors. They all owed his mama for what they'd done. But he'd never been quick nor sneaky, and if he got

caught, he would be beaten, maybe even jailed—neither of which would help her.

He could beg. Maybe if a ration of water had been distributed recently, someone would have shared, but not now.

He could search for it himself, dig around the city for any hidden wells that had yet to be tapped. But he had no idea how to do that, and, of course, *there is no water in the City of Lies*.

Most importantly, none of those would change anything. If he stole water now, he would need to steal more the next time. If a neighbor shared some with him now, would he be back at their door in a month, begging? If he managed to find the first wet well in centuries, how much water could he get before everyone else swooped in to claim their own share?

This was no way to live—from drought to drought, praying the body would survive this one, only to pray again when the next one came. He had to make a change, and he didn't have much time. Soon, he wouldn't have a tongue.

"Mama, I must go," he said softly. "I must find water."

He'd thought about it for years. He'd even once mentioned it to his classmates at the schoolhouse,

only to meet ridicule. Since then, he'd kept his plan to himself, thinking it over and over, discarding it just to have it scuttle back to the front of his mind like a determined scorpion.

*There are no heroes in the City of Lies.*

His mama's eyes unglued and she stared at him in near recognition. He raised the saucer again to her lips to give her the rest of the water before he left, but her hand shot up to grip his wrist, stunningly strong.

"Mama?"

Her neck rotated one way, then the other: a slow, arduous *no*. She moved his wrist toward his own mouth. At first he resisted, but when he saw how much strength it was taking from her shaking arm, he allowed her to put the saucer to his lips. He even tilted his head back and let her pour the last trickle of sacred water down his throat.

He felt tears building behind his eyes, but he squinted them back, refusing to cry in front of her.

*Tears are precious*, he could imagine her signing.

Summoning the last of her energy, veins straining against the skin of her throat, his mama leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. Her lips were so dry and brittle that they scratched his skin. She issued a prayer, her throat rasping with