

## Chapter 6

*For a man to act himself, he must be perfectly free; otherwise he is in danger of losing all sense of responsibility or of self-respect.*

—Henry David Thoreau

### **Bobaka, Cuvette Department**

### **Republic of Congo**

### **Kouyou River Area**

After six days of arduous travel, Dr. Okeke finally managed to cross into the Republic of Congo. He used his old oil company identification card to get around the various checkpoints.

Originating with the tribes, his ID listed a spiritual tribal name, not a legal one. There were few given names to select from at birth within the tribe. At birth, children were named by the lunar season or some definitive physical characteristic. Then, after their spiritual ascension or rite of passage from youth into adulthood, they were given a unique name. Okeke's birth name was Otiteñ which meant star or luminous one, which an English teacher badly pronounced, and the name Okeke stuck. Sent into the western school systems in his earlier teens, he had never been initiated into the Bwiti and given a spiritual name. So he used his older brother's. Government ID cards carried the given name and the spiritual name.

Traveling dressed as a worker, Okeke had not slept well. An indomitable spirit, taking the form of an ancient forest dragon, hounded him whenever he tried to sleep. Each night, he shot up from bed sweat-filled and breathless. There was little escape. He needed to get to his tribe's forest; hide amongst its indigenous spirits; only there might he find respite and call upon his ancestors.

After the fourth night, he knew the dragon was near. The news reported a fire at the last place he slept, which had started in his dreams. No longer safe to sleep, he drove himself to the limits of his physicality. As he kept to the forest trail, with little water and no food or sleep, his senses barely registered reality—only fear drove him onward. Far past physical exhaustion, he staggered into what he thought was the Mitsogo village of his youth on the evening of the eighth day. Making his way into the central square, he asked anyone who came within his awareness where his clan's cattle corral -kraal- was located. Unconsciously speaking in French, all he got was hostile looks.

Swaying on his feet, the concrete structures in the tribal square and the starched white shirts of the men puzzled him. Somethings not right here. A dizzying wave of hopelessness swept him to his knees. This is not my tribe—I'm terribly lost. I have to continue on. As exhaustion and fear consumed him, he braced against a wall. I must think. His mind shouted. Summoning his will, he held the fear at bay and raised his head to challenge the surroundings.

I know that tree. That's the tree that we used to . . . those hills . . . those hills are in the right place, the river is down that way, down that road where we . . . yes, this is the right area. Has the tribe moved? Across the square, he observed a group of women wearing tribal colors. Relief swept over him. Closing his eyes, he refocused to ensure it wasn't another waking dream. She's formally greeting that man as her mate, and he's wearing a starched shirt. Her robes are tightly woven, the . . . the children are clothed western style. Then it dawned on him. It's from the oil exports. They have excess. A giddy wave of assurance washed over him. Raw nerves exposed, he began to laugh insanely. Utterly exhausted, he dared to close his eyes and slid down the half-wall of the gathering area. He could feel the exhaustion seeping out of him. Dream images formed immediately, and the dragon was waiting, mocking him. I mustn't sleep. He told himself. Not yet. Surrounded by

shrieking monkeys, he could feel a shadowy presence approach. He bolted awake. Surrounded by excited children chattering and pointing at him. With his blood-drained face and red eyes, he was quite the sight. A young teen, wearing a black heavy metal T and jeans, led an older woman dressed in bright red and yellow flowing cloth. Her headdress was that of the village leader's chief wife.

“Is he *nzambi*? The youth asked, poking at Okeke with a stick. The woman quickly seized it.

“No, Jaal,” She frowned at the boy's lack of manners, “Though he is of this place, I see his clan in him. Go and call Rahyana—she is in the fields—her family has come.”

Hearing the name of his sister-in-law, Okeke now knew she was the tribal chief-wife. Respectfully he stood for a brief moment, wavering as he searched for appropriate words of greeting. Irritated that he could not find the words, he crashed to the ground, unconscious and utterly spent. They had to carry him to his brother's kraal.

Due to the influx of cell phones and other modern amenities, many villages no longer felt integral. They left the tribe four years ago, seeking the security of tradition. Okeke's parents had journeyed onward, leaving the kraal to his elder brother, who embraced the new technologies and expanded the wealth of the kraal considerably. The now prosperous kraal, still owned by the family, was run by his brother's chief wife, Rahyana. Chosen for medical school, Okeke was away when his brother died of influenza.

The morning found Okeke nestled in a sleeping bag with the dank earthy smell saturating his senses. He had unexpected feelings of completeness. Unified with the world in a way he had not felt since his youth, he stepped out refreshed. A group of children curiously stared but kept their distance. “Boo!” Sent them shrieking. The innocence of the moment struck Okeke deeply, causing him to smile at the chaotic scene. A woman in bright attire nodded respectfully to Okeke

before entering. He followed her in and sat a discreet distance. Soon Rahyana entered, trailed by two teenage boys.

“My prayers extend to you.” Rahyana bowed, touching her heart and then lips. “I trust the day finds you well?”

“It does.”

“Is there anything you lack?”

“Merely a place to relieve myself and perhaps some tea.” Her oddly familiar formal greeting threw him a moment, then warmed him. “I am truly sorry about your husband—my brother, he bowed. I was not informed of his passing.” This was not true; a classmate had told him the news of the passing. Fully engaged at university, he had declined to make an appearance.

Conscious of the doubt that flashed across her eyes, he watched as Rahyana only politely nodded at his predicament. “Hamond here will show you to the latrine houses.” She motioned to the boy, “I will have tea ready when you return. Do you take milk?”

“And some cane juice if available.”

After some polite conversation over tea, Rahyana spoke directly. “In what way may we serve you? Have you come to claim tribal rights?” The tea was served with soft cassava cake covered in coconut flake.

“I . . . I am being hunted by a white spirit and need the strength of my tribe.” He spoke this in the Bantu Fang, looking nervously sideways at the apparent chaperone. He did not understand her question of tribal rights. Her directness had caught him off-balance.

“All can see it on you.” Rahyana did not raise her eyes, but he could hear the contempt in her tone.

“Has the tribe lost its manners while I was away?” He glared at the other woman. “Has your newfound riches bespoiled you?”

“Forgive us; we had no intention to bring anger. Rahyana was merely pointing out that which all can see.” Her face held no guile.

Rahyana shifted her weight. “What is it that brings such desperation upon you?”

Her tone made Okeke realize he screwed up. I’ve been away from the tribe so long I forgot how they think. If I apologize, I’ll embarrass them further. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath to center and spoke without emotion.

“This spirit hunts me is like no other I have heard of. It possesses bodies and channels at will. It knows the past actions of others. I believe it to be one of the ancient ones.” The attending woman inhaled sharply at this revelation, causing Okeke to shoot a glance at her before continuing. “It is also a dream-chaser.”

Although her head remained down, Okeke could see Rahyana’s eyes widen. The chaperone seemed frozen.

Okeke asked after a long pause. “Is there a place for me here?”

“There is a place.” The chaperone spoke softly. “I would have you speak with a *nima na kombo* from the forest. He may find you a better place. You should rest until the moon is up. We will return to collect you.” They politely waited as silence hung thickly in the hut.

Okeke’s mind ranged; he didn’t know why they were just sitting there. They want something from me . . . what? I left this tribe when I was young. Does she know of me, or is she just being overly deferential? I am a strange man who has returned uninvited, and by tradition, she must see to my needs—they know nothing of me. Where are all the men of this tribe? I’ve only seen a couple of them, but it’s been mostly women, children, and aged men. The men must be out

working the refineries leaving the women in charge. He threw a friendly smile at the chaperone, but she did not return it. She just sat with an expectant air.

They must be leery that I could become a threat—I would be. These people don't know if I can be trusted. They may be waiting for some sign of connection, but I have no choice but to take them into my confidence. Looking back at his sister-in-law Rhyanna, the look on her face saddened him, and he suddenly burst out.

Gushing like a lost child to its reunited parent, he told her of life after leaving the tribe, his medical accomplishments, the recruitment into Corvus—without too much detail—and the relentless dream spirit that chased him. Hearing this, she conferred in a strange tongue with the chaperone for some time. Eventually, they agreed he should be led to the Babongo Shaman—a Bwiti adept in the forest and rising to leave; Rahyana beckoned him to follow to another dwelling.

“This is Urlla-Nadege; she is of this family and of the forest clans. She will guide you and protect you until your return. I go now to prepare a place for you.”

“I . . . thanks.” Okeke bowed, causing Rahyana to nod coldly.

I guess I shouldn't bow to family. Okeke guessed incorrectly.

Later, Okeke followed Urlla-Nadege, who glided soundlessly along the river forest path. As they traversed the sloping ground, the air was heavy in the gloaming of the forest evening. Sounds amplified with the darkness, and he could hear drum and harp play from a distant village. It was a strange experience to see torches dancing through the forest, smoke leaving the thick trail of a billowing cloud. As the dancers moved off, the sounds were muted by the dense foliage of the river forest. The guide suddenly stopped, causing Okeke to look at her questioningly.

“They gather spirits for the initiation; we must not make sounds.” She spoke quietly. Focusing, he tried to imitate her patient stillness, with poor results. Twenty minutes later, they moved on. As they approached the next village, night sounds were loud to him. Most likely from the lack of urban noise. Pausing to accustom himself to the unfamiliar surroundings, he felt lighter. The feeling that he was being pursued was no longer with him. It’s working, he thought. The forest is concealing me.

As they neared the Mbandja temple—also called a chapel—she gestured for him to wait outside while she made appropriate inquiries. Squatting down in tribal fashion, the sensory intoxication of the odoriferous forest soothed him as he drank deeply with each inhale. Feeling restored, he was no longer fearful. After five minutes, she waved for him to enter.

The walls of the Mbandja were well decorated with carvings and musical instruments. Its floor was covered with an assortment of wildcat pelts, spread in seemingly random patterns. Two benches ran the length of the sizable rectangular space. A tall mirror hung on one wall, reflecting a sizeable Catholic cross on the opposite wall—it seemed out of place. A bicycle wheel hung sideways from the rafters. The confluence of old and new was so unusual he almost missed the Shaman sitting quietly on the floor by the central pillar. His nut-brown skin shone brightly in the torchlight as he sifted a basket of sapling roots.

“Does the crucifix bother you?” His french was surprisingly erudite.

“Not really,” Okeke was too calm to be baited. “It’s just odd to see it in this . . . rustic setting.”

The little man smiled as he rose to fetch water from a silver ewer. “The Bwiti is a syncretic religion combining animism, the Bieri ancestral cult Fang, and Catholicism in an ever-evolving theology. Its core structure is initially based on interaction with forest spirits, with ancestral

worship thought to be added later by China traders. Today, the word Bwiti is translated as the passing, or ancestor, relating to the spiritual family line of the dead. Its syncretic ties to Catholicism stem from the influences of the Church brought in by Portuguese traders. Many of the tribes are learning the truth behind the Church.”

Okeke nodded at this. Whatever they wanted to believe was alright with him.

“You understand belief as a preference, not as a knowing. That is why you are here.” With a rare set of full teeth, the man’s smile said he could read him. He began to mix water into a pestle. “The Bwiti Iboga ritual uses several psychoactive plants, mainly iboga—the powdered root of the shrub *Tabernanthe iboga*—which is taken in visionary amounts to “break open the head”. The purpose of this ritual is to become aware of our ancestors who can intercede in the spirit realm.”

“You’re using a visionary drug, a hallucinogen . . .” Okeke inspected one of the saplings.

“Yes, doctor. The effects of taking the entheogen iboga result in a disassociated state of consciousness combined with a distinct loss of subjectivity—a convenient playground for spirits. To know what pursues you, I need to spiritually expose myself to it.”

“You are remarkably well educated for a . . . a person in your occupation.” Okeke was impressed. Confused but impressed.

“I am a priest. I serve these people. When I was young, I left the tribe to study in Paris. I learned much about the material world, and as enthralling as that is, it soon became apparent that it’s the spiritual world that holds life’s substance.”

Urlla-Nadege quietly spoke to the Shaman in a language Okeke was unfamiliar with, but he caught the word sacrifice.

The priest turned to him. “You have brought an offering?”



Okeke had forgotten about the skin of palm wine Rahyana had given him. He handed over the wineskin. “You use this for ritual sacrifice?”

The priest smiled. “Of a sort. The ritual anthropophagy once used humans, but now the Bwiti only sacrifice chickens.”

Okeke raised his brows at this. “Seriously? Like voodoo?”

“No, I’m just kidding. The wine is for me.” He took a drink from the skin.

Urlla-Nadege spoke again, this time at length, before bowing politely and leaving the room.

“She says that you do not seek a place amongst us, but you do seek a place.” He resumed mixing. “What hunts you is an ancient spirit, long without hope. It has been seen in other vision quests but always to the side, never on the red road. Many had noticed its presence, but few can describe it. Have you seen it in your dream walks?”

“I have felt it . . . yes, I saw a forest dragon, though never in its entirety, its presence was . . . immense.” He didn’t know why, but he kept his voice low. “I have seen other things, heard . . . heard, spirits speak—seen them.”

“These things you’ve seen, are they passed events of great trauma?”

“Yes, but through another’s eyes, Okeke nervously looked around, “always through another’s eyes. I can feel what they felt.” The statement was foolish in his ears, causing anxiety to rise.

The little priest seemed unfazed. “Then those people have passed onward, accusing you through this spirit. They speak out against you to God. They seek to hinder you, yes?”

“I dare not sleep, can you . . . is there a way, a spiritual path, to get me to a safe place?”

“It would not be wise to travel without knowing.”

“What must I do?” Okeke shifted, irritated by the vague statement.

“Confess and purify the evil from your heart. After you have done this in truth, you may beseech your forefathers to advocate your position and counter this spirit’s protestations to God. To do this, you must first purify, then take the journey.”

“Iboga journey?” He was hesitant to express doubt. “I . . . I am not Banzie.”

“Yes, I know. This spirit is impulsive; its power lies in hatred and fear. We must journey, make inquisitions, and learn why this is happening firsthand. The priests will gather forest spirits to mask you. This will take some time, so you should rest while you can. You will be called when it’s time.”

“How can I thank you for this kindness?”

“I do this because I must protect this area from the evil that tracks you. When it is done, you must abandon yourself and renew your life, for like the lion, it is always hunting, waiting for you to falter. Until you do this, you will not be here.” He touched his heart.

Okeke thought he understood—he would not be welcomed back.

The truth of it was far more precarious.

Following the woman back to his sister-in-law’s kraal, he was given food, and a separate dwelling to sleep in that reeked of smoke and rendered animal fat. He was told not to leave the kraal until the village shaman visited them.

Okeke was again awakened by his sister-in-law. This time accompanied by a female chaperone he had not yet met.

“You have slept continuously, not eating or drinking for two days. You must replenish the body.” He recognized the two boys that set down bowls of nourishment and a tea settee.

He thanked her for the sustenance, surprised that so much time had passed. He could remember no dreams. He felt as though he'd just laid down, but the signs of sleep were all there. Sleep was in his eyes, and his side was marked with small pits and lines from the rugs he'd laid upon.

"How was it with Nengue?" She asked him using the Bantu Ngala speak.

"He thinks he can shield me with spirits of the forest." He responded in French.

"You should not speak that language if you seek aid from your forefathers; you know of their resentment."

"I can understand Ngala when I hear it, but I cannot speak it. It has been a long time since I was amongst the people. I was sent off to work in the city before I was initiated into the Bwiti; I was not permitted to be banzie."

"I have a memory of this. My husband spoke of much sorrow in the parting. You were dear to him."

"Yes, he was my best friend. Why was I not sent to this village's Shaman? Was it out of embarrassment for me not being *nima*? And why is Fang not openly spoken here? Is there still resentment among the people?"

"So many questions?" She patted her forehead with a folded cloth. "The old separations are gone; the Bwiti Shamans now work together. Word has been sent. The Shaman will call at a time of his choosing. Did you give Nengue the palm wine?"

"I did not. I thought it best to present a French wine for the ceremony."

"I question the wisdom in that." She frowned, "Was it well received?"

"He seemed pleased with the selection. I know it goes well with chicken." Okeke smiled.

"You jest with me." Her smile was off-balance.

Okeke laughed. “Only a little.” In light of the last few days, it felt good. He felt hopeful for the first time in days; the forest dragon was no longer in his dreams. Still, remnants of memory from people he had hurt were there, but not like before. He no longer felt what they felt when they experienced the confusion of death, the fear of the unknown. The kid he framed, the prostitute he had accidentally killed, Rene’s suicide, and many others, invariably from their POV. Witnessing his actions from the eyes of another was strange; feeling what they felt was much worse. How could he see through another’s eyes or know what they felt? He convinced himself that these flashes must be his imagination. He passed it off as a side-effect of sleep deprivation and buried it. During his daytime musings, Rahyana had been studying him, her distaste for him barely concealed. Mistaken by her concern, he asked her opinion on what he should do.

“You know what wounds you, yet you deny it like a child.” She looked down, “How sad.”

“You know not what you speak off.” It was the last time he would try *that* tack. He spent the rest of the day brooding until dinner was called.

“You might as well rest, for the ritual will not end until first light.” His sister-in-law was concerned that his good nature had faded with the light of day. “The Shaman will have to consult Nyingwan Mebege, the sister of god—who is the moon—then he will see you. Rest easy, for this place is well protected.”

After she left, he tried to doze, but sleep eluded him. The more he tried to not think of his past, the more intensely he was haunted by it. If I ever get through this, I must stock up on Librium, He reminded himself as he left the dwelling. Now, where in the hell can I find some of that palm wine?

At the V Africana Legion, the Sergeant in charge of the Munroe-Gamma reported to his Cohort Commander.

“We have located our recalcitrant Dr. Okeke, sir.” The Sergeant announced.

“So soon?” The commander looked up, “Where has he gone to ground, someplace nearby?”

The Sergeant called up a map. “Here, at his old tribe, it’s on the border of the Congo and the republic. He’s been hiding in this forest just across the Kouyou river.”

“How confident are you with this information, Sergeant?” The commander looked skeptical. “That’s a pretty remote area.”

“I can only verify that private Munroe’s information has been accurate. Witnesses confirmed Okeke’s passing at each place he led us to. Through, uh . . . some insights, we had been able to track Okeke’s progress down to the day. The last verified sighting came from this refueling station, which somehow caught fire just as we drew near. There’s some suspicion the doctor may have set the fire. We’ve requested camera feeds. The police are waiting for clearance to release them.”

“I’ll see to that. You said something about insights; what are you referring to?”

“It’s Munroe,” He shifted nervously, “Each morning, he would come up with a fresh trail, claiming he could only get what he called glimpses of Okeke. Midway, I didn’t believe him and wanted to call it off, but then the scouts would find things—traces he said would be there. He called it a mental divining rod—I call it creepy. Munroe’s changing, sir. At one point, he thought he could give me orders. I quickly corrected him on that.”

“I see. Well, the doctor needs to be back here as soon as possible. When can you accomplish this?”

“It’ll take at least four days. We don’t have the doctor’s exact location. Munroe says that something in the forest is shielding him—whatever that means. It’s ah . . . right about here,” He pointed to the Moussaka river port, “We should be able to copter in without too much fuss. Then it’s by riverboat to this bend and about a two-day hike in, then out. There’s a lot of guerrilla activity on the border, so we can’t risk the copter. It’ll be a drop and go.”

“Take three men with you; Pvt Munroe is to remain here. Lord Tertius has orders for him to be transferred over to Field Intel. Here are his transfer documents and travel authorizations. He’s to leave for the VII Fulmata immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Sergeant was relieved. The changes in Munroe over the last few days had been creepy, to say the least, alarming to say the most. He knew the power growing in Munroe was beyond his understanding, which frightened him. He inwardly shuddered.

“Is there something else, John?”

“Sir?”

“Come on, out with it, sergeant.” The commander stood. “If I didn’t know you, I’d say you were scared.”

“It’s this Munroe character. I trained him, know a lot about him, but . . .” He fidgeted uncharacteristically, “It’s not the same Munroe, but yet is. He’s still goofy as hell with his Medieval Knights of Honor crap, but now . . . I don’t know; he seems more confident, more commanding. He seemed to know things I don’t even know about me, well . . . not just me, but other men in the unit as well. It’s like he can read our thoughts, and his physical and mental abilities have suddenly become . . . well, they’re just effing weird. What’s happening to him?”

“He’s a volunteer for a special training program still in the trial phase.” The commander’s tone was not reassuring.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s having quite the negative effect on the unit. I’m glad he’s being transferred out, sir.”

“You understand this is not to be discussed.” He looked up from his work. “I know how far soldier talk can go.”

“I’ve told the men to keep their traps shut, and they will.”

“Good. Have Pvt. Munroe report to me immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” He saluted.

As the Sergeant stalked down the hall to find the day officer, he felt his life had been utterly uprooted. He’d come to enjoy Legion life for its uncomplicated world. Now, things were changing; he could feel it. He thought he’d finally arrived when he was reassigned to the cloning ops. The pay and benefits were excellent, and he was involved in something he could contribute. The clones were dangerous, but no more than the animals in National Parks he’d worked. In the wild, you learn to keep your eyes and ears open. The rumors about soul jumps were common, but like all rumors, only a fraction might be accurate, but now he had doubts. Could Munroe be a copy?

“Special training op, my ass, I’ll bet Munroe’s a copy. This whole clone thing is an evil loosed upon the world, and the further away from it I can get, the better.”

After receiving transfer orders to the Sixth Cohort—the Black Cohort, he learned of his promotion to First Sergeant. Pleased with this recognition of his abilities, he accessed the Cohorts command structure and found Munroe listed as one of the Centurions. The following day the entire Cohort was transferred to the VII Fulminata to begin joint strike training. When he was to report for transport, the Sergeant went AWOL. Two days later, port authorities in Libreville found him

on the banks of the Komo River. The police report stated that he had been stabbed to death, victim of a robbery that went bad.