

## AMAIBI

It was the harmattan and the winds were strong. They came and went at will, bending the stems of pliant trees, carrying anything that wasn't held down, and lifting loose sand in swirls. Amaibi could not stand outside his father's hut for five minutes without being covered in red dust.

The adults spent the early hours in the farm and when it got too hot, retired to their huts. Some employed the services of the children to run all manner of errands for them promising treats while for some culinary remuneration, others, instead, chose the persuasive power of the whip.

Amaibi dropped his gourd down the well. His mind wandered once more to the tin of smoked fish that awaited him back in the village. He had been coaxed out of playing football with the boys at the village square by Mazi Anyato who had promised him the smoked fish in exchange for fetching two gourds of drinking water. The well by the village sentry's outpost, at the outskirts of the village, was the only one that was sure to have water in this dry season. Amaibi had set off in a hurry hoping to return in time to receive his reward and meet up with the boys at the square. He imagined the looks of envy he would receive as he ate the smoked fish with soaked *garri* and smiled. He would have to share the fish with his baby sister Esi, but he didn't mind. He was her big brother and that was one of his responsibilities as his father would always remind him.

He had just finished retrieving his gourd from the well when he saw the tower of smoke. It rose as high as the clouds till he could no longer tell them apart. Amaibi's feet swiftly found the path that led back to his village leaving his gourd behind. He had always been a gifted runner and soon he'd covered the distance between the well and his village. He ran into a sandstorm just as he passed the sentry's outpost and was almost thrown off balance.

He shut his eyes and braved the spiraling pillar of dust and red earth. The storm blew grains of sand blinding him, but he didn't relent and soon the storm passed him.

He came upon the village square. Empty. Did the boys finish the game without him? And why would they leave the ball behind?

The heat from the burning huts hit him as he ran past the village square. The compound of the village chief and as far as he could see down the path, huts were on fire. Why wasn't anyone fighting the hungry flames? Where was everyone? He quickened his pace and hadn't gone more than a few steps past the chief's burning huts when he saw it. At first, he had no idea what he was looking at and when realization crept in, so did fear.

Bodies heaped one on top of the other rising towards the sky. At the base was a thick pool of blood skirted by flies. In the pile, he recognized Ebele who lived two huts away from his family home. Her face was twisted in a grimace, as if she was, even then, experiencing some kind of pain. He knew this was impossible yet, that was how she

looked. That was how they all looked. The old man who liked to sit in front of his hut in nothing but his wrapping cloth spitting at the feet of anyone who dared going close to him, the woman who had moved to their village from the neighboring village to sell her wares.

"She is unmarried. That is why she can afford to just leave her village and move anyhow."

His mother had whispered this to him one evening, as they sat outside their hut.

He looked for the faces of his family: his father, his mother, and baby Esi, but couldn't find them. Amaibi fell to his knees and searched for tears in vain. Who could have done this?

The answer appeared from behind the pile snarling, covered in blood. Amaibi sprang to his feet and took to his heels. He ran like one possessed trying not to think of where he was going or what he was going to do when he arrived there. All he knew was he had to get as far away from the village as he could. He could hear them behind him, so he increased his pace.

Amaibi was an excellent runner, the fastest child in the village. He moved like a bullet let fly from the barrel of a gun, running back the way he had come. He was deep into the forest in no time. The leaves worked in his favour, telling him just how close his pursuers were. He spared a moment to think, he somehow knew his best chance at survival was to reach the river and pray that its fast-flowing current would

carry him as far away from his village as possible. He had heard the tales, yet nothing could have prepared him for what he had just seen.

The story of the half-men was one every child in Amaibi's village was familiar with. As a young boy, his father had always reminded him of the lifelong enmity between his people and the half-men of the mountains.

Long before his village was founded, the great warrior, Chimbroma had migrated from parts unknown and had stumbled upon this vast clearing of red earth which was to become his village. Together with his traveling party of warriors, he had set up camp on the clearing which over the years grew into a small community of families.

They hunted for meat and soon learned to till the soil. They lived a relatively peaceful life until the half-men had descended from the mountains. The half-men, who lived in the caves carved into the mountains, were a mix of beast and man. They possessed sallow skin, their teeth and nails had been sharpened to razor edges, and they never walked on their two feet, choosing instead to crawl on all fours like animals.

Chimbroma and his warriors had thought it wise to sit with these creatures and break bread with them in a bid to make peace. That night, the half-men returned and by morning families were missing loved ones. Provoked, Chimbroma gathered his finest warriors and went to confront the half-men in their caves. The warriors never returned, but from that day the half-men never again set foot in their village.

Over the years, however, those who strayed too close to the mountains went missing, leading the villagers to believe that the half-men still existed. The village chief at the time then decreed that parents make it their duty to pass down to their children the tale of the half-men as a cautionary one. It had been over fifty years since the last person went missing and his village had settled into a peaceful and prosperous life.

Amaibi was snapped back to reality by a growl from behind him. They were getting closer, so he quickened his steps, not allowing one foot to rest on the earth before replacing it with the other. He was going to make it to the river one way or another. He had frequented the river with the other children many times to know that it was just beyond the Great Tree in front of him.

He was almost at the tree when a hunched figure appeared in front of him. Amaibi darted past it and in a matter of seconds was shinnying up the tree. He had never climbed the Great Tree, it was forbidden plus the trees were huge, but Amaibi was a skilled climber like his father, and he soon found himself far from the ground.

Hugging the trunk, he took his first breath since he had started running from the half-men. He sucked the air deep into his lungs and expelled it through his mouth as he searched the base of the tree for his pursuers. They soon emerged from the bushes and surrounded the tree.

In the sunlight that stole through the leaves of the tall trees he could see their skin glistening in all its paleness. He watched as they circled the tree trunk growling and spitting at him, some of them bared their teeth, clawing at the air towards him.

From his perch, Amaibi could see the river just a few metres away. He knew it was going to be impossible to reach the river with the half-men at the base of the tree, so he steadied himself and kept climbing hoping they would tire and leave him be. He tried to recall all the things his father had told him about the half-men. He had been told they were afraid of water, they couldn't run and they couldn't climb trees, and although, at the time, he wasn't sure how his father knew these things, he had never questioned him.

A loud cry from beneath him stole Amaibi from his thoughts. His mouth fell open as he looked to the base of the tree; the half-men were climbing the tree. Amaibi went further up the tree till he came to the lowest branch and sat on it.

Amaibi had a clearer view of the river from the branch. He then looked to the sky and saw the birds circling, wings spread in flight. For a moment, he let his mind drift up to them, he allowed himself float through the clouds. He closed his eyes and stretched his arms wide apart just as he had seen the birds doing, his knees locked around the branch. Amaibi willed himself to imagine that the harmattan winds, which blew against his bare chest, were strong enough to lift him. When he opened his eyes, he smiled and breathed in.

Amaibi could hear the growls and snapping of teeth as the half-men climbed higher up the tree just beneath him. He knew they would reach his branch and then he too would suffer the same fate that had befallen his people.

A gentle breeze caressed his neck and wrapped his bare body till goose pimples emerged from his ebony skin. He continued climbing till he got to the topmost branch that could hold his weight. Securing his position, Amaibi looked down again. The half-men had gotten to the lowest branch. He was hit by a smell of rotten flesh and dried blood. They could run as fast as he could, they could climb too, but somehow, in that moment, Amaibi was sure they couldn't fly.

With a half-smile on his face and thoughts of his family stuck on a continuous loop in his mind, Amaibi took to the skies.