

FJCE/JHS/22/0013

Chapter One

Today was Friday and the day of sacrifice for the great god Tano.

Pokuwaa returned home from her last trip to the river and went quickly into the kitchen to place the water there ready for use. Daybreak was near and her excitement was mounting. She ran through the compound to the bathroom outside her hut, bumping into the bamboo enclosure in her haste. She stripped off her clothes and scooped the water over her body. The water was a bit chilly in the morning air. She should have heated it, she thought, 'but if it saves me a little bit of time . . . * Time at Brenhoma was counted by the sun and now although the sun was still behind the clouds, very soon it would break out and the shadows could lengthen. Speeding up, she slipped on the stone floor and had to step into the wooden water container to steady herself.

Very soon the house of Tano would begin to fill with people, and she had to hurry to get there in time for her turn at consultation and sacrifice. She could feel inside her the drums that would sound for the gathering for sacrifice in all the neighbourhood. People would bring yams, sheep, goats, eggs, cowries. What a person had to sacrifice depended on

her requirements. In some cases people were asked to bring cows. Pokuwaa thought how lucky it was for her that it had to be simply a hen and eggs; though it had been difficult getting a hen that was black all over.

She dashed back to her room, rubbed her limbs with some shea cream; then she sprayed herself with smooth white clay powder. This was for purification and it was essential on this day of sacrifice. That done, she hurried out of her room with her calabash full of eggs.

Where was the black hen? Pokuwaa went to the post where the hen had

been tied and at sight of the broken string, her mouth fell open. She began to tremble. Who could have given that string a twist and broken it? She rushed outside and began searching under the small bushes there.

‘What evil spirit wants to spoil the day for me?’ she moaned. ‘Help me, O Almighty. Help me.’

She ran into her room to get some more grain. With this she started off to look for the hen in the village. If she could see it, she would spread the corn to lure it back to her.

For three days she had kept watch over the black hen and today, the day of the sacrifice, the hen was missing. It had been difficult to obtain such a hen in the vicinity of her own village, Brenhoma, and she had had to travel over six miles to buy one from the next village, Nsutem. The owner had insisted on taking two hundred cowries for it. Pokuwaa had tried to bargain for one hundred and sixty, and the owner, who knew the value of that black hen, had refused. These jet-black hens were always being sought after, and if this buyer didn’t buy it, another was bound to come along some day. Someone else would be quite willing to pay two hundred cowries.

So Pokuwaa had paid and taken the hen to Brenhoma, put a single bead on its leg for identification and tied it up for safety. And now the hen was gone.

‘But it was there this morning,’ she remembered. ‘I spread some corn for it.’ She looked round again.

‘“Eat well, this might be your last feed,” I said as I spread the corn. And it pecked eagerly and swallowed the lot before I could leave the house to collect another pot of water from the river. I went into the room with the water-pots, picked up the last pot and

came out to find that it had already finished all the corn. I said, "You need more. You must eat to keep alive. I need your blood." I put down my pot, went back inside, scooped another handful of grain and spread it for the hen before I left the house.'

Further than this she could not remember. Had the hen been there when she returned from the half-mile walk to the river? She couldn't remember. On her way down to the river she had been busy with her prayerful thoughts, beseeching her ancestors and the gods to bless her efforts to get a child. She had prayed to God:

'You are not an unforgiving
God, God of our forefathers.
Your assistance is not
temporary. You are almighty.
Let all evil men fall before you.'

The importance of this Fofie, this festive Friday which came once every six weeks, had crowded her mind. This day, gods and goddesses moved among men to feast and grant people's requests. And they were powerful. They could answer her need for a child. The ancestors of her father and mother would surely help her. If she herself had wronged anyone or if the sins of her parents or ancestors were being avenged on her, the deities could be besought to spare her the pain of not having a child of her own. That was why she had been told to get the black hen. Jet black, that was it. Was the black hen not there when she returned from this last trip to the river?

What had happened in fact was quite simple: as soon as Pokuwaa had gone out of the house a cock had come along and joined in the feast. Then he had started making approaches to the hen. It was not easy in the game with a string round the hen's legs and so in the struggle that followed the string made of old raffia palm had snapped. The hen,

now freed, had followed the cock out of the shed, and out of the yard. The hen had taken a dust bath, and then the two of them had ventured out into a narrow lane leading to the bush outside the village.

Pokuwaa rushed along at first, but, seeing no sign of the black hen, she slowed down in an attempt to look more closely in nooks and corners among the crowding huts.

Soon she came upon some children playing in a lane. 'Children,' she pleaded, 'have you seen a black hen here?' One of them started to run away. 'Why,' she called, 'come back! I want you to help me find my black hen.'

One of the children soon volunteered an explanation. 'He is running away because he has been throwing stones at a black hen which passed . . . '

'What?' interrupted Pokuwaa eagerly,

. at a black hen which passed here a few minutes ago. That is why he is running away,' he continued.

'Show me where you saw the hen,' said Pokuwaa, controlling herself.

'There!' many eager mouths shouted; and many hands pointed towards the bush outside the village.

'Where? Come with me and show me.' Pokuwaa now addressed herself to the little boy who was said to have been throwing stones at the hen. He looked younger than his seven years, and had bushy hair with cowries and shells tied in it.

Pokuwaa looked at this boy and felt immediate sympathy for him. She knew that such children should not be harshly treated, let alone beaten. For it was feared that if they were beaten the fetish would take them away. And so they were pampered and especially cared for.

‘Take me where you threw stones at the hen,’ entreated Pokuwaa, reaching for the hand of the fetish child.

The other children trooped after them. Soon they reached a mango tree.

‘That was where I first saw the hen. It was with a group of fowls, but it cackled the loudest, and I threw a branch. I just threw a branch,’ he rattled on. ‘And it went over there.’

Pokuwaa was now getting impatient. She looked at the rising sun in the crimson sky, and knew that if she was to get to Tano’s home in time, she would have to hurry. It was with an effort that she reminded herself that she mustn’t get cross with a fetish child. It was one such child that she herself was seeking—and if she was successful. . .

‘Oh, God,’ she groaned, ‘who could have set that hen free? Who?’

They were almost at the bush outside the village, and there was nothing to do but to enter it and search there also. By now she was really worried.

Could this perhaps be the work of evil spirits who, knowing Tano’s greatness, had spirited the hen away, to stop her from making her sacrifice? She knew, at least she had been told, of ghosts who walked the streets at night, of fiery witches who stayed on tree-tops doing all kinds of wickedness. They had power to turn things into small objects

and, through incantations, spirit them away. She had been told of a child who had been turned into a chicken and slaughtered; of a man who had turned himself into a crocodile and devoured a young girl who had jilted him.

‘But here I am,’ Pokuwaa thought aloud, ‘taking the words of Tano seriously. And now I can’t find the black hen.’ It had been on a Friday six weeks ago that, in the unlit room of Tano’s shrine, the oracles had told her to bring this black hen and eggs to be offered to the spirits so that they might bring her madwowa back to her. She had sacrificed four times before; white cloth, and cowries in tens, without any success; but this time the demand for sacrifice had come from Tano himself, and Tano was great.

‘Great Tano,’ she cried, ‘assist me in my plight. You are powerful and nobody can thwart your will.’

Would she find this hen in time, or was this day to be lost to her even if she did find it—if she found it too late?

‘What a world. When you find the hoe you can’t find the stick. When you find the stick you can’t find the hoe. Oh, Adwoa Pokuwaa! I am in a tight lane.’ She was weeping now, seized with the fear that if she failed to make the sacrifice and lost this chance of bearing a child, her fate as a barren woman would be made certain. Then her old age would be doomed to loneliness; no child to care for her, no grandchild to warm her compound and no issue of her blood at all to mourn at her death. She would be buried of course by the relatives and her brothers’ children would be there, but there was nothing better than having your own children at your funeral.

The children with her had turned the search into a game of hide-and-stek. Some went behind bushes, throwing pebbles at each other and

imitating bird and animal sounds. Others were giving chase. Only the fetish child continued to search with Pokuwaa.

They were getting into denser bush when her eyes fell on a shiny black back, through a tangle of thorny stems. Her heart leaped and she thrust her arm through the thorns without caution. Her hand was stabbed, but as she withdrew it what she noticed more than the pain was the blood that dripped on to the green leaves at her feet. She was fascinated by the red of her blood, and a thought ran through her that with this red fire in her, this fine blood, she was certainly young enough to have a child.

Why was the hen so still? Was it dead? The noise from the children should be enough to startle it if it was not dead.

And yet dead hens always lay on their back or on their side, never on their belly. If this turned out to be a hen indeed, and alive, and with a single bead on its foot, then her day was saved.

She broke off a branch and began to push the thorns aside to make an opening, and before she knew it the fetish child had shot through to the other side and was making his way towards that black back in the bushes beyond. There could be no mistaking that cackling. It was a hen. But why was the fetish child pulling? They both saw why at once. They saw the black snake that had been trying to swallow the hen. Then everything happened at once.

The fetish child shot back in fear; the children screamed and ran away; and Pokuwaa tore her way through the thorns towards the black hen and the black snake. She wasn't afraid of snakes. She had killed one at an early age and had lost her fear of them long since. Soon the black snake was flattened out on the ground and she was pinning it down with the sharp end of the branch in order to pull out

the leg of the hen, which had been swallowed up to the thigh, while the hen flapped and cackled hysterically.

Pokuwaa was aware of a sense of triumph. If the black snake was a bad spirit, or a man turned into a snake, it had been conquered.

The first round of her battle was over. A prayer was on her lips as she ran the whole way home:

‘Okatakyi Brempong,

Leader of men, linguist of all gods.

You know the deep and see what comes.

The rest of the fight is in your hand.

Okatakyi, my praises of you will never end.’

When she arrived breathless in her compound, Kwadwo Fordwuo was standing there, waiting.

‘Come,’ she panted, ‘I’ll tell you about all this when we’re on our way. We are lucky to be getting there at all. I’ll fetch my eggs.’

Chapter Two

The god Tano was carried on the head of a middle-aged man strongly built in the shoulders. He was in a state of possession. With him in the room was the priest.

'Rub the leaves in your left hand, and as the juice emerges, rub it on your body. After your bath with the water boiled with the tree barks, drink a cupful of the bath brew, and walk quickly to the house without turning back. All this should be done very early in the morning just as the dawn breaks.' The priest issuing these instructions after the consultation held his own ears by way of emphasising to Pokuwaa the importance of her listening with care. Kwadwo had come into the room also after the consultation was over, and he was standing beside Pokuwaa, nodding heavily as if the instructions were as much for him.

When it was all over, they bowed and left the shrine. Outside, other people were waiting their turns at consultation and sacrifice.

'I'm going to spend this whole week with you while you perform these purification rites,' Kwadwo was saying. His voice was comforting.

Pokuwaa, who hadn't expected him to offer to do this for her, was pleased; yet, wanting to test him, she asked, 'What about your wife?'

She knew that Kwadwo's wife had the right to resent such an arrangement, but in her heart she hoped that he meant it.

'What about your wife?' she insisted softly. 'She won't like it.' She looked straight at Kwadwo for his response. 'You'd better go back to her,' she said, turning her eyes away.

'No. She will understand,' said Kwadwo slowly. 'I shall explain your problem to her.'

They walked on in silence to Pokuwaa's house.

That night, when Kwadwo returned to her, she asked him whether his wife agreed to the arrangement.

'She says she does not mind,' he calmly replied. 'Her only prayer is that this does help you to get a child.'

He knew he was lying. The talk with his wife had only resulted in a quarrel. She had protested vehemently against his spending all that week with Pokuwaa, saying that she would not sell her rights to any barren woman.

Kwadwo had left the house in anger. Even as he told his lie now, he was looking for shadows, fearing that his angry wife might rush in at any minute to make trouble.

That night seemed to last a long time. Pokuwaa talked to Kwadwo endlessly to keep sleep away. 'I don't feel any of the excitement I used to feel on previous occasions when I had to make a sacrifice,' she said.

'Perhaps,' Kwadwo suggested, 'that is a sign of greater confidence in success. Let's hope that a child will come this time.'

'Do you believe that? I am looking forward to that day,' Pokuwaa's

voice was sad. 'Oh, how I shall cling to that child . . . even if I have to stay away from work on the farm,' she sighed.

Kwadwo laughed. 'And what will you eat?' he asked gently. 'God is there. We shall eat,' Pokuwaa replied, sighing again. 'Yes,' said Kwadwo. 'He will give us to eat... if we work.'

Pokuwaa laughed in the darkness, and added, 'I remember the story of the two men who went to the Denteh fetish for consultations. One was told he would become rich and prosperous; the other that he would die in poverty.'

'Yes, I know,' Kwadwo interrupted. The story was a wellknown joke. 'And the one who had been promised wealth sat under the village silk cotton tree waiting for his fortune, while the other man applied himself on his farm.'

'And who was it who died in poverty?' asked Pokuwaa.

'Are you asking me?' laughed Kwadwo. They were both laughing as they recited together, 'The one who was waiting for the gods to provide.'

Pokuwaa stretched her limbs in the bed murmuring, 'Yes, it does seem that, in this world of ours, those promised impending riches never get them.'

Kwadwo was tired. He hadn't slept for two nights. He had been attending a funeral celebration at Ninting. It was not a small effort to return from there in time for Pokuwaa's consultation at Tanofie. Ninting was a long journey from Brenhoma.

'If you hadn't been worried about the black hen this morning,' he said, turning to her, 'you would have had to worry about my not arriving here at the time you expected me. Part of the distance I had to run. You would have laughed to see me jumping over logs, and rushing as if someone was pursuing me.' He touched her as she laughed tenderly in the dark. 'And all that rushing was on a stomach that had been punished with funeral fasting for two days. I wish we didn't have to wait for the dead to be buried before we can eat.'

'Don't tell me you mind fasting at your own grandfather's funeral.' Pokuwaa knew Kwadwo wouldn't take offence at this. 'Besides,' she teased, 'what about all the palm wine you men take the opportunity to drink just because custom allows you to kill your thirst?'

'If you women envy us that, let me testify to you that pots of palm wine on an empty belly do the body no good at all.'

'Then why . . .?'

'Pokuwaa!' Kwadwo didn't have to say any more than that to stop her pursuing the subject. They both laughed again.

'Soon after the old man was quietly in his pit, and the last of my responsibilities had been carried out, I left Ninting with some other people. I was in so great a hurry that I got far ahead of them.' Kwadwo smiled to himself as he heard again in his head the sound of his own mellow voice shouting to his fellow travellers to speed up, and echoing through the forest strangely in the darkness before dawn.

'Also,' he continued, 'I prayed.'

The room became very quiet as he sat thinking of how he had prayed as his feet brushed the dew. He had called on great Tano to make it possible for

Pokuwaa to bear a child. The thought that she had divorced two earlier husbands because she couldn't have a child with them had come strongly to him then, and he had vowed to do everything he could to help make the sacrifices a success. He was very anxious to save his own marriage with this woman.

These heavy thoughts were a burden. He fell back, pulled the cotton blanket over his head, and went to sleep. Pokuwaa whispered, 'Are you asleep?' and as there was no answer, she busied herself for a little while with the lamp.

The rag wick in the earthen pot was sputtering and would soon go out. She always had a supply of good oil skimmed from palm soup. With some of this she filled the lamp. It was soon burning steadily again. As she slipped quietly beside Kwadwo again he felt her touch and stirred.

'You must not leave me to sleep alone,' she murmured. 'Sometimes when I'm alone like that I begin to wish I had a husband of my own.'

'You mean, I am not the man for you?' he asked.

'I mean someone who hasn't got another wife. And then I shall not have lonely nights, and can come close to him when I hear ghosts moving through the night, and fear.'

Kwadwo touched her and said, 'Pokuwaa.' And she could feel that he was there. Did this feeling of wanting him always by her side mean that she loved him? She knew that whenever he wasn't with her she felt dejected and insecure. And then she would lie in bed turning all night till cockcrow when signs of day would bring relief. She would get up then and

pick up her pot to fetch water. She would anxiously count the three days

he had to spend away with his other wife.

'Yes,' she thought, 'without a child I am a person who needs your company. When you're away. I'm alone. But, if the high God is there, who comforts people, some day I shall have my own child to comfort and keep me company. A matter of time . . . and luck. Oh, Adwoa! What luck is mine!

People get children without going through half the troubled oath I'm travelling now. I can't sleep, and I am always waiting for the dawn.'

She sat up and watched Kwadwo's calm, sleeping face. She drew nearer to him and lying down pulled part of the blanket over herself. Sharing in his calmness, she herself was soon visited by sleep.

Kwadwo was first to wake up. He found Pokuwaa still by his side, and realised that the white clay marks were not on her body. The scent of pepre seeds with which she should besmear herself was also absent. And it was already daylight. His heart gave a big thump. He lifted her bodily and sat her up. The sun was already shining. He could hear birds, and the fowls and goats outside.

Pokuwaa rubbed her eyes, looked round, and becoming aware of the situation, cried with despair, 'Alas! The first day of sacrifice is lost.'

Chapter Three

'Akye o, Pokuwaa!' Pokuwaa didn't have to go out into the compound to see who had come to see her. Only Koramoa said good morning like that. And how welcome she was on this day.

'I'm coming,' she called, relieved to have a friend to help her to forget the gloomy thoughts with which she had been sitting inside her room since Kwadwo had left. She had had an ordinary bath, and could not find any spirit in her to do her household duties. She had even started to have some doubts. She observed that the list of barks and herbs given her at Tanofie was the same as had been given her the previous year by a herbalist at Mmuoho. She went over the list again and asked herself, 'Why then didn't I bear a child at that time?' Since then she had carried out other sacrifices; giving away cowries to the destitute, sacrificing, on two occasions, a cock to her father's spirit. She had done all this with the readiness that a new wife applies to her duties.

'Akye o, Koramoa.' Her eyes fell on the child her friend was carrying in her arms.

'Yaa Peafo,' Koramoa responded. She knew and enjoyed using formal appellations like that. 'I saw you as you walked out of Tano's house yesterday, but you didn't even greet me/ Pokuwaa sighed, 'Hm.' She remembered seeing Koramoa and her husband waiting outside.

'We were going to do our thanksgiving sacrifice,' Koramoa informed her.

There was no point in Pokuwaa asking what for. She knew it was thanksgiving to Tano for helping them to have a child. She had watched the whole course of events. Koramoa was full of praise for Tano when she was expecting the child. Every Fofie she danced at the drumming. She gave birth without any mishap.

'How is life this morning?' asked Koramoa. She hitched the child to her side, wrapped part of her cloth round him, and placed her breast in his little mouth.

The two friends sat down and talked about their farms at Bentenkoro, but most of the time Pokuwaa's eyes rested on the child, and in her mind's eye she pictured the day when she would be holding her own in her arms.

'How old is the baby now?' she asked after a while, reaching playfully for the child's hand.

'About five months. I shall never forget the trouble he gave me while in my womb. And now he is born, he is always crying. I never have time to myself,' Koramoa proudly complained.

'He will soon grow and you will be free,' was all Pokuwaa could make herself remark.

'When will that happen?' her friend went on. 'That will be years from now,' Pokuwaa smiled kindly. 'It will come one day,' she said.

'One day,' Koramoa rejoined. 'It is indeed true that man is never without any trouble on his head. Now, I wish somebody would take

care of him to make me free again.'

'You mean you are wishing for the days of our girlhood when we were gay and playful?'

The question brought happy laughter from Koramoa. 'Oh, we shall never have those days again,' she declared. 'Girls of these times have nothing of the time we had.'

She and Pokuwaa had been playmates in their girlhood. Not much had happened or changed since then at Brenhoma. Just as they had done, girls still played Ampe, and also Asogoro in which they lined up to sing songs of praise and admonition, in solo and chorus, and also in song made references to their boy friends. Pokuwaa remembered that she had found it very thrilling at the age of five to learn to count in the Ampe jumping game. Koramoa agreed with her that the Ampe game was every little girl's favourite. 'But,' she reminded her friend, 'think of all that came out of Asogoro!'

'I am sure,' Pokuwaa said, 'that Kofi Dede, your husband, has forgotten by now that it was through our Asogoro that the two of you developed your love affair.'

'And I am sure,' Koramoa replied, 'that wherever Kofi Daafo may be, he will always remember those days.'

Kofi Daafo was Pokuwaa's first husband. She and Koramoa had met these husbands at the same time, and from the playground had carried their childlike affairs into serious reality and married. Koramoa stuck to her husband, and for years people thought she was not going to bear a child. Pokuwaa remembered that when she divorced Kofi Daafo, her

friend was also tempted to think of a break for the same reason.

'Now you see/ she said aloud, 'if you had divorced Kofi Dede, you would perhaps be as I am today/

'Why? Is he the only fruitful man in the world?'

Pokuwaa knew that Koramoa didn't mean this remark to be taken seriously, so she said, 'You cannot deny that this child has blessed a long union. What I'm trying to tell you is that I might have profited in the same way if I had stayed in one place like you.'

Koramoa had to leave, and as she hitched the child on to her back and tied her cloth firmly round him, she still complained that there might be good reason in what Pokuwaa said, but 'the child is giving me too much trouble already, and I'm beginning to doubt if he will give me the happiness I dreamed of.'

After saying goodbye outside, Pokuwaa returned to her house thinking how true it was that memories could not be brought back to life. When she sat down, thoughts of Kwaku Fosu, her second husband, came to her mind. She had been fond of that man, but there was no child, and she divorced him. Her mother used to come and say, 'You see, my child, you should have children. You are my only daughter, and unless you have a child our fives will end miserably.'

'But mother, what can I do?'

'You have been married to Kwaku Fosu for nearly three years. There is no sign of a child. Will you still stick to him?'

'But mother, we cannot force a child. We'll leave it to God. Besides it is not easy to walk up to a man and tell him, "I have divorced you; go!" I can only do that if he actually does me wrong.'

After this from time to time her mother brought little faults to her notice. 'The other day,' she reminded her. 'Tie didn't come with you to the farm even though he knew well you needed him.'

But it was something quite trivial that Pokuwaa eventually took up with Kwaku Fosu and broke the marriage.

Then she met Kwadwo Fordwuo. In the very first month of their meeting Pokuwaa's blood failed to appear. Then there were signs in her breasts. O God! There were signs that she was expecting a baby. One month passed. She told her mother.

'Keep quiet about it,' the happy woman counselled her daughter. 'Don't tell anybody.'

Pokuwaa's excitement grew. But one morning she saw her blood again. It was a drop, then a streak, and then a flow.

'Mother, I am seeing blood again.'

'Let me see,' she said, afraid to believe it. It was blood. She took Pokuwaa to the medicine man.

'Your child is having a miscarriage because you never sent sacrifices in thanksgiving to the fetish which gave her to you. You remember Anowuo?'

Pokuwaa's mother nodded, but desperately implored, 'Can't you do something for us?'

'No,' answered the man. 'This conception will be lost, but if you carry out the sacrifice, another child will come very soon.'

'What is required for the sacrifice?'

'I can see the fetish in here,' said the man after his incantations. 'It demands a white sheep, eggs, and a length of white cloth.'

The mother paid three cowries for the consultation.

That was Pokuwaa's first and only experience of childbearing. She cried a lot, but she took the event as proof that if she continued with Kwadwo, another child would come.

He had another wife who already had two children by him at the time Pokuwaa met him. Another was born to them soon after this miscarriage. Pokuwaa's friends knew how depressed she was with her misfortune and they came in to comfort her, sitting round and doing jobs in the house.

'Do not weep so much over it,' they said. 'If you do, your okra will be saddened, and will turn its back on you. If you weep things will not happen as destined for you,' they explained.

'But things are already not happening right for me. Adwoa, what luck I have. Me nkrabea nye.'

Her friends felt her sorrow and wiped the tears from her face.

'I do not know what I have done to the gods,' she moaned. 'The very thing for which I have sacrificed often, passes away.'

She could not accept comfort even from Kwadwo himself, who tried to keep her mind on the possibility of another chance. For some time, she could not bear it when he talked of this probability, and for many days she spread a grass mat on the other side of the hut to sleep by herself.

'These thoughts,' she sighed. 'Why do they come to press on my soul?' She got up from the yard determined to forget—and yet when she reached her room, she knew she didn't have the spirit for doing anything else. She spread her mat to lie on it and think.

The days of her early youth were with her. She was one of the girls whose hand had been asked for before coming of age.

When they became engaged all the girls liked to display their wrists on which their engagement bracelets were tied. And in fact the red parrot feather and rich yellow beads did look attractive on their soft wrists. A girl would go to all sorts of tricks to get someone to notice her bracelet and ask, 'Oh, has your fiance tied his Akyikyibaso on your arm?'

Pokuwaa was beautiful, plump and deep dark. When they tied her Akyikyibaso on her wrist to engage her to her young fiance Kofi Daafu, people said they had never seen a sight so enchanting before.

'And then the days came when mother said I couldn't go out,' she said aloud. That time was so puzzling, so strange and so full of joy. She couldn't go anywhere during her seven days' ceremony. She was forbidden to do anything besides eating and sleeping. 'Yes, some

memories are good after all.' She could feel a little comfort in thinking of how attentive her mother had been to the correctness of her outdoor ceremony.

'You are my only daughter. My five sons will have children for their wives' families; but the child that you will bear will be my own grandchild,' her mother had explained. She had praised the gods that her Pokuwaa was already engaged. Some girls, she said, had been known to sit for months and even years after their outdoor ceremony before getting a child.

Pokuwaa became quite cheered, thinking of her outdoor ceremony. She could see clearly the scene in the village meeting ground when she was openly declared to have come of age. The drums thrilled her. The women who had come for her sake to share her ceremony, danced the length of the main street and back to where she sat under the silk cotton tree on her high stool among her ceremonial maids and other girls, and surrounded by the presents from the man who was already acknowledged her husband. Her foot was on her future path, and she and everybody else there knew that her next step would be to give birth to a child. She knew that Kofi Daaso was proud of her. They played like friends and often talked about how they would treat their child when it was born.

She knew he loved her. He had a habit of turning playfully and whispering something in her ear. She wouldn't hear, but she knew he was telling her something about his love. When he was not with her he was at his father's house. They went to work on the farm together. People said that she was using charms on him, but Kofi knew better. In her company he always radiated happiness, and she knew this meant he was happy with her.

Then the first year, and the second year passed. There was no child. She remembered that this had made her heart afraid because of the people of Brenhoma. To them, to be barren was the worst that could happen to a woman. The approach of her time caused her apprehension every month. Seeing her blood saddened her deeply. She had a talk with her mother.

'And that is when the story of my sacrifices began,' Pokuwaa said aloud, turning over to press her face into her pillow.

'Who is that?' she called, for she had heard somebody in the yard.

She heard a child's voice saying, 'Me.' Pokuwaa jumped up and ran out. She saw standing there with shining eyes the tiny daughter of Afua Fofie, her neighbour.

There was something between Pokuwaa and children. They would always come to her. But whatever she did for them their mothers always came and took them away. She lifted up the child and took her into her kitchen to give her food. They were sitting there talking like friends when Afua Fofie entered the yard, looking for her child. There she sat eating. Without even a greeting, Afua Fofie reached for the child and gave her a slap on her face.

'Why, Afua?' asked Pokuwaa, feeling very hurt. Instead of replying to the question, Afua addressed the child. 'I have told you not to come here again,' she shouted.

'Why?' Pokuwaa asked again.

'Listen, I am not talking to you,' said Afua, dragging the child

along. Pokuwaa was very angry at this but the child was not her child.

'Don't ever think I shall ever do harm to your child. May God forbid,' she said, almost crying.

'The child is my child. I have every right to take her away, without explaining myself to you,' said Afua rudely, as she left the yard.

'Kra Adwoa,' said Pokuwaa, 'don't get sad. This will not go on for ever. Some day we also shall have cause to be glad.'

She rose from the kitchen and walked to the gate. Standing there, she could hear children's voices in the town. How many of them had called her mother when she played with them. And even when she was a young girl herself and she and her friends played mothers and children, they all wanted her to be mother because she was soft and mature-looking.

At times there were more than one mother, but the children would rally to her side and climb on her thighs and make believe with 'Mother, mother, mother.' She liked the very sound, and she acted like her own mother, saying, 'Oh, don't worry me, children. Why are you always so troublesome?'

They would fall off, and come again. She would put one across her lap and smack her bottom. But however playfully she tried to be hard, she was always the centre of their attraction, and they came. 'And even if those days were spent in dreams, why have the children I loved so well deserted me?'

She walked out of her house towards Afua Fofie's house to see if the child was still being beaten. Hearing no sound, she was returning home

when two other little girls saw her and ran to her.

She was glad, but she said to them, 'You'd better go to your mothers. They might be looking for you.'

'No, we will stay. It is not dark yet,' the older one said pleadingly.

'No, you can come another time.' She took their hands, walked them a little way, and went back to her kitchen.

In a few minutes she saw a head peeping through the kitchen window. When she walked towards the gate the two children she had sent away started running away. 'Ama Foriwa, wait for me, don't leave me behind.'

Pokuwaa smiled. 'Children will be children, never thinking of anything but their play.'

She entered her room. 'I should stick to Kwadwo, and leave the rest to God,' she thought. 'Even if it breaks my heart to do it, it is best to attempt to build new memories.'

Chapter Four

As she concluded the rites of her purification, Pokuwaa became more optimistic. Each morning, on rising, she went to the outskirts of the village and, standing over a log of the onwoma tree, she scooped water, in which the herbs had been boiled, over her body seven times.

The planting season had started. She worked lightly on the farms and didn't carry any heavy loads. Her mother insisted on this, doing most of the housework for her.

'You must not work hard,' she counselled. 'You must conserve your strength for the child.'

Pokuwaa tried to tell her that she felt quite strong and that working was better than sitting idly around.

'You do not know how tiring it is to bear a child,' the mother countered. 'You will live to remember the experience. When you were being expected the headaches and the fevers I had! Most of the time. But your father was very sympathetic and did many things for me. Things are not what they used to be. The men of today don't care as much about their wives. Indeed times have changed.'

When six months passed without result Pokuwaa wondered whether purification and sacrifices would ever cease to be part of her life. She had been told at Tanofie that if

she did the things requested of her she would not have to wait for more than three months for a child. True that she had lost a day of the rites, but

she had gone through the remaining days punctually and correctly. Keeping watch and seeing nothing happening, she went to see Tano again.

'There is no result yet,' she told the priest. 'But Tano is a great god who can correct anything that is going wrong.'

She knelt down for the priest to hold above her head the white tail of a horse

—or was it a cow? He lifted it three times and she felt fine particles of sand falling out of the tail onto her shoulders. She dared not look up to see as that would mean challenging the god. So she kept her position, her head bent down.

'Tell me how you went through the ceremony. The oracles say you did not do as commanded,' the priest said.

'I am here to find out what went wrong, nana,' said Pokuwaa submissively.

'Tell me how you went through the rites,' the priest said again. 'You did something wrong.'

Pokuwaa narrated her story, adding, 'You said I should not look back as I walked home.'

'Yes, that is where you went wrong. It was not once, but twice that you looked back.'

That was correct. Pokuwaa's knees trembled. On the first occasion she had left her sponge behind and turned back for it. On the second, she thought she heard footsteps and turned to see who it was. When she did,

she saw a man crossing from one side of the path to the other and wondered what he was doing there at that time. She ran home, scared that she had seen a ghost. 'How do these fetishes see everything?' she thought as she knelt there.

The priest said, 'Now, my child, go back home and do as you are told. You will be given another collection of the herbs. Boil them in water and use the water to bathe for seven days, and then come and see me.'

She bowed and withdrew from the presence of the priest. His linguist whisked her away and gave her the herbs prescribed.

If her only mistake last time was that she looked back, she was determined that nothing of the kind should happen again. At home, Kwadwo asked her to repeat the drill again in his hearing.

He was now really apprehensive about Pokuwaa's barrenness, fearing that with the years passing away she would wake up one day and demand divorce. It had happened to her two earlier husbands, and he never ruled out the possibility. Whatever he did he bore at the back of his mind that he had a superior duty to Pokuwaa and that was to see that she had her own child. As she went over the things she had been instructed to do, he listened with concentration, in order to help her not to forget anything.

Pokuwaa boiled the herbs overnight in a pot of fresh water from the river. At the first peep of dawn, for seven days, she got up, poured some of the herbal water into a small pot and walked to the outskirts of the village. There, standing over the same log of the onwoma tree, she scooped the water over her body seven times, repeating words of incantation. She concentrated hardest on walking straight home without

loo kin g back. Arriving home she dabbed herself with pepre and white clay, filling the room with a mixed scent of tree barks and clover. If Kwadwo was asleep she nudged him. He woke up and sniffed the scent of the pepre. 'That is nice,' he said. 'You'd better get nearer.' He held her close and rubbed his nose into her neck where the scent was strongest.

They took delight in each other, and Pokuwaa was conscious that during this time she was hanging on Kwadwo's praises and admiration. She dressed in new clothes and paraded for him to see her and say she was nice. It wasn't Kwadwo's normal way to speak his praises. Once when he said he didn't like the clothes she wore, Pokuwaa broke out crying. He learned his lesson. Also, he did enjoy the way his admiration sent her walking with her chest out and swinging her arms luxuriantly.

The rains had begun. The two of them worked hopefully together. She made yam mounds, prepared the seed yams, dug her fingers into the raised earth and planted, enjoying it like a child, but working hard. She promised herself that she would teach her child this work. Many times, she returned home quite late.

Kwadwo often went with her to the farm, carrying his cutlass and walking ahead. He made jokes as he cut through the climbers that nosed their way into the footpath to clear the way.

They¹ worried about the heaviness of the rains and the rats that were eating their way through the farms; especially as these animals were uprooting the yams ger mina ting in the mounds.

Kwadwo made adwaa round Pokuwaa's farm to protect it. It look quite

a long time to cut palm branches and stake them in, but the adwaa proved effective in barring off the rats.

'People of Brenhoma are lazy,' Kwadwo complained. 'It will not take the people of another place a week's hunting to kill the rats that trouble them. Here, they sit and watch them running through their huts.'

'Don't put so much salt into it,' said Pokuwaa, 'although you are right to say they ought to do something. Why not suggest a hunting to the community?'

'Who am I?' said Kwadwo. 'The elders should take the initiative if they are worthy of being the leaders of men. The other night, as I walked behind Opanin Kofi Mensah in the dark, I coughed and he started running. How can such an elder make serious decisions?'

'Wait,' Pokuwaa warned, 'it will be your turn to become an elder very soon.'

'Yes, and then we shall take a man's decision to fight the animals, not walk with women to collect snails.'

Kwadwo had a gun that his father had given him. Sometimes it failed to fire, and during the dry season he had spent time mending and cleaning it. He took it regularly to the farm and succeeded once in a while in shooting a deer or

antelope. He also spent time between the planting and the harvest weaving new mats for Pokuwaa's door.

For friendship, he sat sometimes with other men under the silk cotton tree

to drink palm wine from a special calabash which he took pride in cleaning himself. Pokuwaa, not wanting him to drink, hid the calabash many times saying, 'Wine is not food, and should not be taken in excess.'

He was a man and a man must drink, was Kwadwo's retort. When she asked him what he gained out of it he declared, 'Power. Full power,' not sounding at all like the man round whom the earth had moved at his first calabash of palm wine.

'Left alone I know you will not drink,' tried Pokuwaa again. 'It is Kofi Badu who is drawing you into bad company.'

Kwadwo swore that on the contrary his friend Kofi Badu was a very good man. 'I dread what I would be without his counsel.'

'Counsel about wine?' asked Pokuwaa, meaning to be saucy.

Happily for her there was plenty of work on the farm for them. Sometimes she tired and was conscious of ageing, but these were things she didn't like to think about. Her mother was helping her with housework, it was true—but supposing she couldn't fetch water? Staring her in the face were sure indications of a lonely old age.

One Saturday, as she was hurrying to her farm, another woman joined her at the outskirts of the village. They had a mile to walk before branching off to their different farms, and the company was welcome to both. Their pace was slowed by the other woman's four-year-old daughter, who had tearfully resented the idea of being left behind at home, and annoyed her mother. She was now being made to walk as a kind of punishment to deter her from insisting on coming along another

time. At first, the little girl walked briskly, very likely enjoying the fact that she was not being carried. But that didn't last long. Soon she slowed down, complaining that her ankles hurt. Her mother merely told her sharply that if she did not walk she would be left behind.

The little girl tried out of fear to quicken her steps, but soon broke down. Her mother stood angrily over her. The girl, seeing this, gave a sharp cry of dismay that sent pain through Pokuwaa's heart. She could not understand the woman's attitude.

'Why not pick her up? You mustn't let her cry,' she said.

'I can't carry her,' the other shouted. 'She is as heavy as lead.'

'I wonder why some of these children don't come to me. I will handle one like an egg,' Pokuwaa said. The woman was very much amused.

'I don't think you will. You will get fed up soon enough,' she said. 'I thought the same way when I hadn't had my first child. Then came the first, the second, the third. This one is the fifth. And now I can't even eat. They take life out of me. Sometimes I get fed up with life, the way the children give me trouble.'

Pokuwaa listened to her carefully. Was all this true? Here she was equally fed up and bored with life because she had no child. If a mother was fed up when she had children, then what life was this?

'You mothers sometimes behave as if you don't have any pain at the birth of your children,' she said.

They continued their walk, the other explaining, 'We do, but it needs, perhaps, patience. Well, Sbo yebehyia.' They were parting, the woman having reached the branch off to her farm.

As Pokuwaa walked on, she could still hear her shouting at the little girl to keep up her pace. She envied the company which the child provided, wishing she had someone to talk to.

This year the rains became particularly heavy. The compounds were muddy and the paths thick with weed. People were forced to stay in bed till late in the day. They could do nothing more than come out briefly to eat. Families were grateful for their reserves of corn, for food was running short, and they could not go to their farms.

Pokuwaa made a small fire in her hut on which to roast corn. Kwadwo spent many hours with her sitting at the fire. She specially enjoyed the playful struggles between them for the little food that she could prepare.

When the sky cleared one day, Pokuwaa took the opportunity to visit Koramoa. She found her cooking. Her child, now a toddler, was waddling about, splashing mud over himself, falling down and struggling up again. He was clearly enjoying learning to walk and refused to sit down. When Koramoa caught him to wash his feet he let out shrill cries and wriggled to get down.

Koramoa regretted that the days had made their meetings so irregular, and complained about the naughtiness of her child.

'We must try and keep in touch,' said Pokuwaa, 'as human beings should do.'

'You are very nice,' praised Koramoa. 'I was thinking of coming to see you, but what with the rains and this boy... I want to discuss with you Kofi Deede's behaviour recently. He has started giving me trouble again over women. Only last night, when I was sitting here waiting for him, someone came to tell me that he was in the hut of Akosua Seewaa. I went there and caught them together.'

'So where is he now?' asked Pokuwaa.

'He has gone out again,' said her friend. 'He is so ashamed he cannot look at my face. You see, I had seen him with her once, but when I asked him questions he denied having anything to do with her. Now I hear he wants to marry her. If that is true I shall divorce him.'

'Oh, Afua Koramoa, be a little patient,' Pokuwaa counselled.

'I have tried patience for too long,' Koramoa retorted. 'First it was for a child. Now I have a child and I am not happy. I shall leave him.'

'With your child you should be a happy woman,' urged Pokuwaa. 'You leave Kofi Dede to his ways. He will cool off soon enough.'

'No,' her friend insisted. 'I can't even eat well. Look, I haven't eaten today.'

By the time Pokuwaa left, however she had managed to calm Koramoa down and got her to agree to stay and watch.

'He will have to eat there,' said Koramoa as an afterthought. 'I will not cook for him.'

'If you do that it will be like sending him like a gift of yam to Seewaa. She will cook and eat without saying thanks to you.' Pokuwaa knew these words would make an impression on her friend.

As she stepped outside, she saw Kofi Dede coming home. Passing him she whispered, 'Stop what you are doing,' and walked on.

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