

PROLOGUE

The sun reigned high in the sky on that midsummer day in late April. There was a sense of urgency in the air to find a big tree with large branches and the shade that accompanied them. Buzzards expertly circled in the sky looking for their next prey while two small male figures anxiously made their way to the top of the hill. One as black as midnight and the other as pale as snow. The boys sweated profusely as they intentionally made their way through the brush to their destination. At birth, one instantly became the prince of the northern African dynasty, Dala, a land that was saturated with black gold, and the other, a missionary's son whose life was built on the solid rock teachings of the Bible. One believed in the African gods of his forefathers such as Aje' Shaluga, Babalu' Aye', Obatala, Tsumbura, and Ogun. But the other possessed the monotheistic viewpoint of his father.

Dala Dynasty was a commercialized industrialized kingdom known for its magnificent iron and dye work. Located strategically near the Jakara River in the Savanna region of Nigeria, this mysterious kingdom sits in a dried-up river basin and is flush with unique vegetation and forests. Tall, thick-stemmed trees populated and provided canopies for the kingdom's inhabitants coupled with a huge masterfully built wall surrounding the city that added protection and privacy. Stepping behind that wall was like taking a trip in a time capsule back to the 19th century.

Ezra Sr. was visiting the kingdom for the summer as a missionary to build churches and schools in the surrounding villages for the king of Dala. He came from a long line of missionaries that loved the African continent. Even though he had chosen construction instead of ministry for a career, he purposed to honor the tradition by donating his services each summer as assigned by an international missionary overseeing an organization based in the United States from the Baptist World Alliance.

Oba Musumbi on the other hand, was a wise, Stanford-educated MBA, who loved his people and was devoted to improving the quality of their lives. He embodied the leadership style of his father who came before him and held his nation, the people, the land, and their history in the utmost regard. His lifelong mission was to modernize his nation to be competitive in the global marketplace. He used his degree and acumen as a keen businessman to solidify the kingdom's wealth. As a result, there was currently peace in the land. But that was not always the case. Religion had divided the dynasty, and Dalo remained predominately influenced by Christianity even in this heavily populated Muslim region after the conversion of his father in his early twenties.

He especially loved his oldest son Oba Jaiye of the Dala Dynasty to a fault. The palace servants had a running commentary on the numerous presents the young prince received on a daily basis. He would often remind Oba Jaiye and anyone who would listen of his rich heritage which started with Bagauda, son of Bawo and grandson of the mythical hero, Bayajidda, the first king of Kano. This steady reminder only fueled his desire to rule his father's dynasty.

Oba Jaiye was an impetuous boy who couldn't wait to sit on the throne as king. He envisioned himself as ruler of the palace compound, and his father, the king, indulged him. Ezra, on the other hand, still grieved the death of his dear mother and didn't want to take the trip to

this mysterious foreign land. His father felt compelled to bring him along because he wanted to keep a close eye on his son. Both boys had a tendency for mischief and should have required close supervision, but everyone was busy building the kingdom and often unavailable. So, the boys were often left to their own devices and broad imaginations.

Earlier in the summer there was a fight between the missionary's son and several older boys in the palace compound. Even though he had grit, Ezra Sr. wasn't a match for the five older boys who attacked him. The young prince had compassion for the boy and rescued him from a beating that could have ended his and his father's stay. All of the kingdom, both young and old were afraid of the young prince because he literally could have them put to death immediately for any kind of perceived transgression that happened within the palace compound. Word traveled fast that the missionary's son was a guest of the prince, and he should be honored as such.

This was the beginning of a great friendship, but as the summer quickly came to an end, so was the boy's visit. Frantic about how to maintain their bromance across the vast Atlantic Ocean, they decided to make a trip to the mountain that housed the altars of the gods worshipped by the natives to solidify their relationship.

They were not deterred by the heat, the scavengers, or the possibility of trespassing against the ferocious gods of the Yoruba people. These things were simply a backdrop to a higher calling. This would be the day that they would deliberately defy all societal norms and cross-cultural lines that spanned nations... today they would become blood brothers forever.

They had grown so close to each other that the king had agreed to let Ezra Sr. share a bunk bed in the prince's palace bedroom. Each night their ritual was to take turns telling each other bedtime stories. Oba Jaiye shared the stories that he had heard at the feet of the learned griots of his compound, and Ezra Sr. the stories of the Bible. It was Ezra's turn to share on the previous night, and he chose the story of Jonathan and David establishing a blood covenant declaring their infinite brotherhood and love, honor, and respect for one another. The prince was intrigued with the story because he was very familiar with the concept of blood covenants and their importance. He had witnessed the ceremonial treaties his father formed with neighboring countries and valued this new experience, especially with his new friend who was more like a brother to him than anyone else. It was also an opportunity to use the Arabian silver dagger with the gold crusted handle that his father awarded to him during his rite of passage ceremony. Once Ezra saw the dagger, they unanimously agreed that it was the only pathway for them to stay friends forever, regardless of their geographical location. They decided to draw up a written covenant expressing the terms of their brotherhood. Each signed it with his boy-like scrawl, shook hands, and returned to their covers anxious for their midday journey to the high holy place where worshippers gathered to pay homage to their gods.

Reaching their destination after an arduous climb, each boy fell to the ground weary of their climb. The sun soon reminded them of who was boss, and they found the internal fortitude to complete the task at hand. Oba Jaiye was the first to stand, reaching out for his friend, he quickly pulled him to his feet. Their eyes met.

"Are you ready, Ezra?"

"Yes."

“No regrets?”

“No.”

Ezra extended his arm as a sign of his bravery. The prince then pulled out the ceremonial dagger that would solidify their covenant and change their lives and that of future generations forever. And the gods smiled.

