

## PROLOGUE: THE THIEVES

The light from Kwadwo's torch flickered uncertainly over dusty crates and sacks and an industrious spider before it touched something reflective and flared into his eyes. Gold. A ceremonial shield covered in beaten gold and precious stones. His heart began to hammer against his ribs.

"I told you," Kwabena whispered. "Enough gold to set us up for life. And this is just one tomb." He took the torch from his cousin's hand and held it higher, illuminating everything in the tomb. Wooden chests had been stacked neatly against the walls and woven sacks piled on top, all covered with a thin layer of dirt. There were statues the size of a just-walking child carved from wood and ivory and cast from metal. Gold? He brushed a finger against the shoulder of the nearest one. Brass, probably. He scrupulously avoided looking at the burial effigy of the chief.

Kwadwo tried to keep his hands from trembling as he reached for the neck of a sack. The fabric tore as he tugged at it, and a river of small bones slid hissing onto the grimy floor. He jumped back, stifling a shriek. Not bones. Strands of pearls and coral beads. The tear in the sack revealed patterned cloth woven with gold thread, royal robes destroyed by age.

"Clumsy idiot!" Kwabena said, then clapped a hand over his own mouth as the words reverberated against the walls. "Be careful. We need to get these out of here. Never mind about the beads—just get the gold."

"How will we carry it? Those sacks look heavy."

“Dump out the crates and fill them with anything valuable.” Kwabena was breathing heavily, and his voice was thick, the way it got when he talked about a woman he desired. The night was hot and humid, especially inside the tomb, but Kwadwo’s skin was icy, and he felt a shiver run through him. It was wrong. All of this was wrong. A chief’s treasure was cursed—everyone knew that. Wretched torment and painful death would come to the uninitiated for disturbing it. Even if they managed to escape arrest and get the treasure to the coast to sell it to the English, they could never hope to outrun the vengeance of the dead chief—and the gods.

“Kwabena,” he said quietly. “I don’t—”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid,” his cousin sneered. “You said you wanted this. It’s our only chance at a good life. We can have land, wives—set up a business. We will be free men, in charge of our own lives, with no one to tell us what to do. No one to call us lazy, good-for-nothing thieves and forbid their daughters to speak to us. We will live like kings!”

“But if we’re caught—”

“So let’s hurry up and load this stuff on the cart before anyone in the village sees us. We can get it buried by morning and reach Chief Andoh’s compound in time for breakfast. I know he’ll help us. He hates Chief Boateng—he would never turn us over to him, even if we didn’t have gold for a bribe.”

“I hear he sells prisoners to the English as slaves.” Kwadwo tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. If he mentioned the dead chief or the gods, Kwabena would mock him without mercy.

“Only prisoners that have no value to him, or if he wants to teach their families a lesson. We’ll be wealthy men, and he’ll welcome us. He can help us sell the treasure to his English friends. Everybody will be happy. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose.”

*Except our lives.* The thought of untold wealth almost smothered his terror. A fine house and a curvy wife or two, acres of farmland and men to work it. A legacy he could pass down to his children, as enduring and powerful as that of the chief whose tomb they were robbing. He tried to keep his mind on those things as he and Kwabena methodically cracked the lids of the crates and inspected the contents, taking only the gold and jewels. *This is our chance. This is what will make us men.*

He didn’t realize he was speaking out loud until Kwabena answered him. “That’s right. Besides, the Europeans come here and take what they want—why shouldn’t we?”

## PART ONE

### Chapter One

The castle rose up from the horizon like a white cliff, shimmering in the hazy afternoon and dominating the landscape. Ekua had never seen anything so large, and for a moment she forgot about everything—the dusty, uncomfortable ride on an unpredictable horse, the nausea that wrapped around her throat without warning, her over-solicitous husband, the creeping certainty that this formal audience with the English governor was a terrible idea. As they rode closer to Cape Coast, the roads widened and filled with traffic of all kinds: wagons, horses, and an endless stream of people on foot carrying bundles or children or both. Ekua let out a squeak when she caught sight of her first British soldier.

“Oh, they’re not white at all!” She clapped a hand over her mouth, worried that the man had heard and would be insulted.

“Don’t worry, my love,” said Yaw. “It’s unlikely that he understood you.” He slowed his horse to ride closer to her. “When they first arrive, they are very pale, but the sun turns them red.”

“They look uncomfortable.”

“Yes, I’m fairly certain they are.”

So far from home, Ekua saw their procession in a new light. No longer did the horses with their decorated blankets appear regal and dignified; they looked woefully out of place next to the British horses, whose saddles of oiled leather and polished brass hinted at victory in battle, at dominion over other tribes. The chieftains, dressed in their finest ceremonial garb, now

appeared backward and uncivilized. A feeling of foreboding sank into her belly. “We shouldn’t have come,” she whispered. “These people will laugh at us.”

“Not at all,” Yaw reassured her. “My grandfather has always been on good terms with the English governor. He will receive us with respect, and if all goes well, he will agree to our request. And then I will show you Cape Coast and the ocean. You’ve never seen it, have you?”

She tried to shake her head, but the nausea rose up again. She covered her face with the loose woven shawl Sisi had wrapped her in to keep the dust of the road off her finery.

“Are you well, beloved?” Yaw asked, drawing his horse nearer.

She swallowed hard against the bile. “I’m all right!” she snapped. Seeing Yaw’s hurt look, she added, “I’m just worried about meeting this governor. What if he doesn’t care? How will we even speak to him?”

“I will speak with him,” Yaw replied. “My father sent me to mission school, so I speak the Englishmen’s language. He—and my grandfather—always knew that we would need to establish good relations with these Europeans, and that meant learning their language and their religion. But there will also be a translator so you and everyone else will know what’s going on.”

Yaw rarely spoke of his childhood or his parents. Ekua decided to keep him talking, if only to distract herself from the roiling feeling in her stomach and the way the horse seemed to choose her own way without regard for her rider’s commands. “You learned their religion? What is it like? Weren’t you afraid the gods would be angry?”

“The English worship only one god, and their holy men believe that this god wants them to travel to other nations and convince the people there to worship him. It’s why they set up

schools, and the traders encourage it because it's easier to trade with someone who speaks your language." Yaw was silent for a moment. "Attending the mission school probably saved my life because it meant I wasn't at home when the fever broke out. All the same, I would not send my sons there." He smiled at Eku. "I want to see my children—and their mother—every day."

Eku forgot her fear momentarily and let go her death grip on the horse's mane to take Yaw's hand. When he spoke of their future, she felt a rush of happiness that overshadowed the day-to-day tedium of her new life and even the unpleasantness of pregnancy. "You will teach our children the white language," she decided. "No need for English holy men and faraway schools."

He glanced up at the sky. "We should arrive just in time for English tea."

"What is tea?"

"Tea is a small afternoon meal. For important men like the governor, it's also an audience time, like when my grandfather meets with his ministers and visiting chieftains. Although," Yaw looked around at the entourage of sixty mounted men and various servants driving carts, "we will make a rather large tea party."

*He is a good man, just as Mama said.* She remembered with a twinge of shame how disappointed she had felt when she met Yaw on the night of their betrothal. "He is small," she had complained. "And his face is . . . plain."

Her mother had frowned at her. "He is an educated man," she had replied. "From a good family. He will cherish you and make you queen someday. What does a face or broad shoulders matter if you have that? And," she added in a conspiratorial whisper, "his mother and father died

of fever when he was young, so he won't have to wait until he's an old man to take the chief's stool, and you won't have a mother-in-law watching your every move like a hungry python."

Still, she missed home—her mother's airy, beautiful house that was always the right temperature, no matter how hot it was outside. Her father's great hall adorned with ceremonial weapons and masks and carved elephant tusks taller than she was. She had felt like a princess there. In her new home, she was treated like a queen, but everything, every day, seemed so ordinary. And now she must play at politics with these Europeans, act like a woman destined to be queen instead of a girl who'd been married exactly four months and wasn't entirely sure she could keep her midday meal down.

And then, somehow, they were there. "This way," called Yaw. "I sent a messenger ahead to let the governor know we're coming. He will expect us in the courtyard any moment."

The next hour passed in a flurry of shouted instructions and milling around. Ekua barely had time to remove her shawl and hand it to a groom. She clung tightly to Yaw's arm as the group was ushered into a courtyard before the massive white edifice and then inside the castle itself, through yawning doors that seemed to swallow them whole and along winding passages and up endless flights of steps. She gasped for breath and glanced back at Sisi.

"Don't worry about me, Highness," Sisi panted, her face contorted with the effort and pain of climbing. "I'm right behind you."

At last their escort opened a pair of tall double doors and stepped aside. Yaw and Ekua led the delegation into a formal chamber with vaulted ceilings and white-painted walls. A table long enough to seat nearly a hundred people dominated the room. At one end sat an Englishman in a military uniform. He was speaking urgently to a tall, thin man dressed all in black.

“That is one of their holy men,” whispered Yaw, glancing toward the man in black. When all sixty members of the entourage had entered the chamber, Yaw cleared his throat. “Governor Maclean,” he said, “My name is Yaw Barima, and I am here on behalf of my grandfather, Chief Osei Boateng of the Asante people. My advisors and my queen and I beg an audience with you.” Ekua stared as her husband spoke in this foreign language and the translator repeated his every word. Even after he had told her about the mission school, it was still astounding to see him do it and hear this English governor respond.

“Yes, Mr. . . . Barima, was it? Delighted to have you.” The governor did not look delighted. “I apologize for meeting with you in such a barren chamber, but I had no idea there would be quite so many of you.” He gave a thin smile. “I’m afraid we couldn’t possibly fit you all into the salon.” He gestured idly toward the chairs set up along the table. “Do sit down.”

Ekua struggled to pull out a heavy wooden chair and then gave up. *I am more regal standing*, she decided. Yaw remained on his feet. “Governor, I regret the circumstances of our meeting,” he began. “As you may know, there is an ongoing issue between our people and Chief Andoh of the Fante, who is, I believe, an esteemed trading partner of yours.”

The governor nodded. “Yes, my brother, James, has informed me of the altercation—something about treasure stolen from a royal tomb, if I’m not mistaken. James urged me to stay out of these tribal matters, but if we are to establish a civilized colony here in the Gold Coast, there must be peace among its inhabitants. Don’t you agree, Mr. Barima?”

“I do,” said Yaw. Ekua could see that the governor’s cool tone unnerved him. The man reminded her of a cheetah watching a bushbuck calf—almost playful in his confidence. “I know that the Fante bring you captives, which you sell to slave traders for a very great profit. I am not



here to tell you that what you do is wrong, only to suggest that there are other ways to profit from these lands, and the Asante would like to engage in such trade with you and your government.” He paused. “If I may remind you, sir, of the treaty you put forth and we signed in 1831, which guarantees the Asante the right to trade on the coast without reprisal.”

“Indeed.” Maclean leaned back in his chair and crossed one ankle over his knee. “I am of course familiar with the terms of this treaty, which you seem to be on the verge of breaking with your intimations of war against the Fante. But pray tell me, what do the Asante have to offer that the Fante cannot match? I’m sure you are aware that the slave trade was abolished by Her Majesty and several other European nations decades ago, so naturally the Fante are no longer bringing us captives to sell. That would be both unlawful and, as my esteemed visitor Reverend Worsley constantly reminds me, immoral.” He chuckled.

Yaw looked puzzled. “Yes, I have heard that the trade is no longer legal, and yet the Fante continue to raid our kingdom and others for captives and sell them to traders, right here on the coast.”

“If this is as you say,” the governor replied, “and I don’t entirely refute the allegation, they do so in violation of colonial law. Alas, I can only do so much to police these ruffians while attending to my other duties. The trade continues to be tremendously lucrative—more so, perhaps, now that it is unlawful—and an unscrupulous trader will always find a way. But you were about to tell me of the lawful commodities the Asante can offer in trade.”

“We have arable land for growing crops,” said Yaw. “And plenty of citizens to tend them. And,” he paused for effect, “we have a gold mine.”

*No, no, no!* Ekua tried to catch his eye. *What is he doing?*

Maclean sat up a bit straighter. “Gold mine, you say?”

Yaw nodded. “Yes. It is near a town called Obuasi. It has several solid veins, and we would be happy to exchange gold ore for weapons and other commodities. And, as trusted trading partners, we would mutually agree not to engage in war with our respective enemies.” Yaw’s throat was dry, and his voice began to crack. “We have brought you gifts as a token of our great respect for you and for Her Majesty, Queen Victoria of England. Those gifts are a mere sample of the quality of the gold in the Obuasi mine and the skill of our craftsmen.”

Maclean’s eyes flickered across Ekuia and rested on her necklace, a broad collar of solid gold that descended from her throat to the rise of her breasts. “And your wife’s bauble, there, that is gold from the mine?”

Yaw nodded. “It is, sir.” Ekuia did her best to stand tall under the governor’s predatory gaze.

“But this mine, is it secure? How can I be confident that it will remain in the hands of your people should we choose to engage in a trading relationship?”

Yaw smiled. “The mine is guarded night and day by at least two hundred Asante warriors, all loyal and trustworthy.”

“Two hundred, you say? That is . . . reassuring.”

Ekuia had to bite down hard on her lips to keep from speaking. Of course she couldn’t contradict her husband in public, certainly not in front of such an important man as the governor, but she was astonished at what she was hearing. Did he not know how this was done? Her father

would never have given away such valuable information, not even to a trusted ally. And this Englishman, she felt in her bones, could not be trusted.

“It is secure, and there is enough gold in Obuasi to make our people and yours very wealthy for many years. If you’d like, I can arrange for you or any of your advisors to visit the mine and see that what I say is accurate.” A bead of sweat appeared on Yaw’s brow, but he didn’t wipe it off. Despite her anger at his lack of cunning, Ekua felt a surge of pride in her husband. At least he was brave.

Governor Maclean stood abruptly and gestured toward an aide. He spoke a few words into the man’s ear. “Gentlemen—and ladies—I regret that I have not the time today to entertain you properly, but I insist that you avail yourselves of the hospitality of Cape Coast Castle. My soldiers will show you to your quarters, and we can discuss this arrangement further at a later date.”

“Do we have an agreement?” Yaw asked, looking slightly bewildered.

“I can assure you, Mr. Barima, that I would never betray a trusted trading partner, and this mine of yours is a most intriguing prospect. I plan to act upon it right away.” He gave a brief bow and turned to go.

Several soldiers appeared as if from nowhere and gestured for the group to follow them.

“What just happened?” Ekua whispered.

“I . . . don’t know,” said Yaw. “I think it’s going to be all right.” His expression showed otherwise, and Ekua felt a twinge of real fear.

The soldiers escorted them back through the twisting passages and down the stairs, even more stairs than before, it seemed. The plastered walls and brass sconces gave way to rougher surfaces and simple lanterns, and the air felt cooler, as though they were underground. At a turn in the passage, two soldiers took hold of Ekua and Sisi and led them off in a different direction. “What? Where are you taking me?” Ekua shouted, attempting to wrest her arm out of the soldier’s grip. “You do not touch me!”

Yaw shouted at the men in English, but they ignored him, and the soldiers formed a barrier he and the other men could not cross. “Ekua!” his voice echoed along the corridor.

“Barima!” she screamed. “Help me!”

The soldiers shoved Ekua and Sisi into a bare, whitewashed chamber. One of them thrust two rough linen shifts at them and mimed undressing. Ekua slapped him hard across the face. The soldier grinned and hit her back. She staggered against the wall, blood dripping from her mouth.

“Highness!” Sisi cried. “Please, please do what they say.” She turned her back on the men and began removing her wrapper. The soldiers leered, but the expression on the one who had hit Ekua soured when he saw Sisi’s thin, twisted right leg and misshapen foot. His companion elbowed him, shook his head, and traced the shape of her plump, rounded buttocks in the air. Ekua’s face went hot with rage and shame. She could imagine everything they were saying. But when their attention returned to her, she quickly unfastened the laces of her heavy robe and let it fall to the floor, pulling the ugly shift over her head. The soldier kicked the garment off to the side and moved closer to yank the ornaments out of Ekua’s braided hair. She cried out in pain as several strands went with them. The soldier ignored her and ripped the heavy

gold collar from her neck, breaking the clasp. Its jagged edge drew a thin line of blood across her neck and collarbone. Sisi wept noisily, but Ekua kept her silence. *I am of royal blood. These red-faced, fish-eyed men may shame me, but I will not show it.*

Stripped of all her finery, Ekua walked between the soldiers out of the chamber and through a heavy door. Another soldier stood waiting beside it with a ring of keys. A heavy hand on her back shoved her into the gloom, and the door slammed shut behind them.

The stench was as thick as smoke. With her first breath of it, Ekua vomited down the front of her shift. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could identify the source of the smell. An inch or more of mud had formed from the dirt floor and the urine, vomit, and liquid feces of the women who were too sick or despondent to make it to the overflowing necessary pails against the far wall. Added to the reek was the heavy scent of menstrual blood. There were at least fifty women seated or lying in the filth. None of them looked up when Ekua and Sisi entered. Stepping carefully across the slippery floor, Sisi guided Ekua to a place against the wall where there was not quite enough room for them to sit down. The neighboring women grumbled but made a little space for them, all except one, who sat with her head on her knees, rocking back and forth and keening. Her entire lower body was crusted with what looked like dried blood.

“Oh, my dear, do you need help?” Sisi asked.

“She won’t answer,” another woman replied without looking up.

“Why? What happened?”

“Soldiers took her to rape her. She fought. They beat her. She lost her baby.”

Ekua wrapped her arms around her belly, as if to protect it. She let out a low moan.

“No,” said Sisi. “No. That will not happen to you, Highness. Chief Boateng will hear of this, and he will get us out. This is a terrible mistake, an impossible mistake.”

The woman who had spoken to them laughed mirthlessly. “You will not get out. No one gets out of here, except to go on the ships.”

Sisi wrapped her arms around Ekua and stroked her back. She whispered in her ear. “Do not listen, Highness. You will be all right. Go to sleep, and when you wake up, things will be better.”

Ekua retched again, but nothing came up. She tried to believe Sisi, but this place was too awful to hold on to hope. “I will die here,” she murmured. “My baby and I, we will die here.” *I will never meet my child. I will never see my husband again. My life is over because an Englishman needs more gold.* In the darkness, among other women as hopeless as she, Ekua allowed the tears to come. Hot and stinging, they dripped down her cheeks and burned in the cuts on her mouth and neck until she fell asleep in Sisi’s arms.