

**The Orò and The Starry
Night
(TW: Blood, Injury, death)**

11:30 PM

The fireworks lit up the night sky, momentarily illuminating the festival below. Boys in white gowns sprinted past, and a man, covered in chalk-white paint, danced to the rhythmic pounding of drums. Tiwa peered out the window, her eyes scanning the celebration outside. ‘Careful, Tiwa. You don’t want to catch a glimpse of it,’ Adumni warned, pulling her away from the window.

‘This is dumb, Adumni. Why can’t I go outside? All the men are having fun,’ Tiwa complained, squeezing her sister’s hand as they wandered through the dimly lit hostel. ‘Don’t worry about it. Let’s just get the video of Madam Koi Koi and head back.’; Adumni glanced around, grabbing Tiwa’s camera

‘I don’t care about some stupid ghost. Madam Koi Koi doesn’t even exist,’ Tiwa scoffed, pulling her hand away.

Adumni sighed, attempting to coax her sister into their usual banter. ‘You could go viral, you know. Imagine the headline ‘*Young Nigerian Girl Captures Ghost on Camera.*’ You’d be famous. Doesn’t that sound amazing?’ Adumni beamed, getting close to Tiwa. *She always smiles when I do this.*

Tiwa blushed, unable to hide the emerging smile on her face. ‘Yeah I guess it does.’ They crept down the hallway, straining their ears for the signature “koi koi” sound. Suddenly, a soft, cloaking noise echoed from the end of the corridor.

‘Sis, make sure you’re recording!’ Tiwa hissed, ducking behind Adumni.

Adumni froze. ‘Crap, the camera’s dead. Time to go.’

As they started to retreat, a woman’s voice rang out, ‘Wait, wait!’ They turned to see a woman dressed in Yoruba men’s clothing—deep black kembe—running toward them. ‘Adumni, stop! It’s not a ghost,’ Tiwa said, laughing between breaths.

The woman approached, catching her breath. ‘Are you Tiwa? The one who’s always talking about Madam Koi Koi?’

‘Yes! We were just trying to find her,’ Tiwa said, hopping out of Adumni’s arms. ‘Great , I’ve found you! Well, I’m Kiri, and I’ve got a better offer. What if I told you that tonight, you could see the Orò masquerade?’

‘Nope, not interested.’

‘What’s the Orò masquerade?’ Tiwa asked.

Kiri shot Adumni a look. ‘You didn’t tell her?’

‘What, tell her about some brutish festival where the masquerade kills any woman it sees? No thanks.’

‘It’s not brutish. The Orò is the God of bull-roaring and justice. They can’t hurt you unless they see you.’

‘You must be crazy if you think I’m taking my little sister to that,’ Alumni said, tugging Tiwa closer.

‘Sis, let’s hear out. She sounds smart—like the people on TV.’

‘I’m only hearing you out because of her.’ Adumni said, walking with Kiri towards the dimly lit staircase.

Walking down the stairs, the sound of whispers and unrest from the lower floor grew.

‘There are many people similar to you guys,’ Kiri beamed.

‘Everyone, meet Tiwa and Adumni. We’re heading to see the Orò masquerade tonight.’ Kiri’s words were met with shocked gasps and murmurs.

‘You must be smoking something!’ Someone shouted.

‘No joke, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and we’re just going to stand here and watch them have fun. Don’t you guys have ambition? Listen, I want you to see the sky outside the window. I’ll tell you every day since that science class, I always went into that deep rainforest and stared at the stars.’ Kiri continued

‘How’d you get through the rainforest? It’s dangerous.’ Adumni asked, noticing the scars on Kiri’s face, more prominent than her tribal marks.

‘I hide, sometimes fight the animals if I have to. But nothing could stop me from seeing those stars.’

‘Why risk it?’ Adumni asked, slightly baffled.

‘Better than staring at grassy plains and wooden buildings all day.’

The crowd fell into deep whispers, with them talking to each other.

‘Listen, all I’m saying is, you guys need to have ambition. I ask you guys to trust me to show you the masquerade, maybe you can also pick your favourite star.’

The crowd fell into whispers again. Tiwa clapped, excited. ‘Yes! Let’s go!’ The crowd began to clap, too, allowing Adumni to escape with Tiwa.

‘Sis, let go of me! Come on, let’s do this,’ Tiwa cried, trying to get loose from Adumni’s large hands.

‘No are you insane? She’s dangerous, spewing such horrible lies. There’s nothing wrong with this place.’

‘Is there? You don’t notice the constant smell of dung in the streets, the near identical days we have. Sleep, wake up, do chores, eat, go to school, and repeat. Are you not tired of that? I don’t want to spend my life like that.’ Tiwa whispered, avoiding Adumni’s eyes. ‘It’s not perfect, but will you risk your life for this?’ Adumni pleaded, getting close to Tiwa. ‘I just want to do something different.’ Tiwa said, with determination

‘O-ok’ Adumni whispered, slightly stunned.

‘Alright guys, follow my mother to get changed!’ Kiri shouted, ushering the group further into the dimly lit hallway.

Now dressed in black Kembe outfits, the group followed Kiri’s mother through the dimly lit hallway. Tiwa turned to the older woman. ‘Why are we wearing these clothes?’ ‘The Oro masquerade travels with a group. If the men see us uncovered, it’s over,’ she said. Her voice was calm, but there was a trace of fear. Adumni eyed the frail woman, noticing her clothes hanging loosely on her thin frame. ‘You’re Kiri’s mother?’

‘Yes dear, you are surprised?’ The mother said, glancing back at Adumni’s astonished look.

‘Me too actually, but I’d do anything if I got a chance to see my daughter.’

The trio entered an empty classroom with a basket filled with clothes.

Both Adumni and Tiwa had a confused look on their faces. ‘You don’t see her?’ ‘It’s hard having a daughter that dreams, one that doesn’t waste a second in fulfilling that spontaneous want, with her constantly travelling the world, trying to discover every nook and cranny of this world or chase *stars*, it’s hard to get a word with her. Here, have this,’ She continued, giving the pair their clothes.

‘That’s amazing,’ Tiwa beamed.

The mother smiled lightly. ‘Why don’t you go on and change, dear?’ Talking to Tiwa.

Watching her walk away, the mother noticed Adumni's concerned look. She tried to sit down on the stool, with some difficulty, leading to Adumni helping her.

'Thank you dear.'

Chasing stars? Adumni glanced over at the mother. The light glow of the nearby candle illuminated her silent, dejected gaze. The apparent lines on her face gave her a permanently tired look. 'There was one time, she had this decision that she would rather die in the forest, with her body contributing to the rainforest, than being buried in the village. But somehow, I managed to convince her by telling her that my dream was to have her leave our last years together by that river, where we always went to every night.'

'That's great ma,' Adumni whispered. Cold sweats emerged from her forehead as she looked over at the mother. She beamed a little, thinking about the prospects. *She's so frail.* Subtle light sounds of Kiri's laughter echoed along the corridor day. 'How annoying,' she whispered. 'Let's get going!' Kiri shouted!

Stepping into the cold night air, they entered the dense forest. A loud, piercing whistle suddenly shattered the quiet, forcing everyone to cover their ears. Tiwa fumbled with her camera, determined to capture the moment.

"Are you crazy? Put that away!" Adumni hissed

Kiri, up ahead, suddenly froze. Her eyes widened as she saw a figure in the distance—a blood-red garment adorned with a wild beast sigil.

'It's the masquerade,' Kiri whispered. 'That's it.'

Tiwa broke free and climbed a tree log to get a better view. 'I want to see it!' 'Get down Tiwa—'

A loud bang echoed through the rainforest, and blood sprayed across the group. Kiri vanished. Panic spread like wildfire.

'Kiri!' someone shouted, rushing to the tree log.

Adumni's face went pale. 'Wait—'

Another bang erupted, and more blood splattered across the crowd. Adumni grabbed Tiwa and ran, the sound of screams and explosions following them. Blood dripped from their clothes, and Adumni couldn't tell if the metallic taste in her mouth was her blood. Or someone else's blood?. Behind them, Kiri's mother cried, 'Adumni, help me!' Adumni glanced back, seeing the elderly woman lying in a pool of blood, a deep gash on her leg.

5:30 AM

Now far from the masquerade crew, Adumni quickly dropped Tiwa, leaving her to go rescue Kiri's mother.

'Wait, wait you can't go back,' Tiwa shouted, holding Adumni's hand to prevent her from leaving.

'Let me go, I have to go get Kiri's mother.'

'You're going to get yourself killed!'

'You've already gotten everyone killed, so it will not make much of a difference.' 'I was just trying to record the masquerade. It was going to help me.'

'Why would you do that? You—'

Adumni sat down next to teary-eyed Tiwa. Sighing from stress. 'I shouldn't have brought you here.'

'It's my fault—'

'No Tiwa, it is mine. I do understand that you're sick of this place. I mean, sometimes I get sick, too. Sometimes, I'm sick of waking up at sunrise, walking miles to fetch water from the river, and spending hours under the gruelling heat of pounding yam. But I have a duty, Tiwa. Fetching water means you get water to drink and shower with, and pounding yam means you get food every day. The point is that I have a duty to keep this place alive, and so did everyone else in that group.'

'What if I want to leave?' Tiwa asked

'It's perfectly okay to feel that way, but just take a chance to look back, look back at this village. Don't abandon us for some glorious ambition.'

'Now I'm going to save Kiri's mother, stay behind.' Adumni beamed, getting close to Tiwa, making her break into laughter.

Adumni crept back through the forest, following the trail of rats to a large puddle of blood. Butterflies hovered above, drinking from it.

"Ma?" she whispered, spotting the old woman nearby. She knelt beside her, trying to lift her up. The mother groaned in pain.

Just as she was about to help her, Tiwa appeared, throwing rocks to distract the approaching masquerade. "Now, go!" she shouted.

"Ma?" she whispered, spotting the old woman nearby. She knelt beside her, trying to lift her

up.

They walked deeper into the rainforest, close to the river.

‘Wait up!’ Tiwa said, catching up to the pair.

The trio walked off towards the gate to the village. Both Adumni and Tiwa were trying to carry the mother, losing grip with the blood rushing from her leg.

"Stop, I can't go any further," the mother whispered, collapsing onto a tree log near the river.' The pair heard the masquerade crew coming in from the rainforest.

‘Adumni, Adumni we have to go!’

Adumni sat the mother down, looking back at the approaching masquerade crew. ‘There isn't going to be enough time. Tiwa, you need to go alone.’

‘Are you crazy—

‘Tiwa, you need to go now. Remember what I told you.’ Adumni barked, seeing Tiwa's tears well up. ‘Promise me, you will remember,’ She said.

Tiwa hesitated, tears streaming down her face. ‘I promise,’ she whispered before running back toward the village.

‘Go now!’

Adumni sat beside Kiri's mother, holding her close as the sound of the masquerade grew louder. ‘Well, ma,’ she said softly, ‘at least we're by the river.’

Tiwa continued running, her heart pounding in her chest. Near the village entrance, she spotted a camera on the ground. She grabbed it before rushing back into the hostel compound. The sunrise painted the sky in soft hues as women walked back from the river, laughing and singing. Tears welled up in Tiwa's eyes as she captured the scene, the camera clicking in the dawn's light.