

MEJI

BOOK ONE

A NOVEL BY

MILTON J. DAVIS

This story is a work of fiction. Any references to real events, persons and locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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INTRODUCTION

Ndoro and Obaseki. Warrior and mystic. Twin brothers rescued from ritual infanticide, only to be separated not long after their birth. Two paths to follow. One destiny to fulfill.

In *Meji*, Milton J. Davis has created an African-oriented fantasy epic that is wide-ranging and deeply engrossing. The novel is set in Uhuru, an Africa that is not the same as the one we know. Uhuru is a continent in which the cultures of our world's Africa developed in different directions, leading to a setting that is at once familiar and exotic.

Meji is a huge tapestry of a tale that encompasses a multitude of characters and a vast variety of cultures, tribes and kingdoms. Yet for all its twists and complexities, the story is tightly knit – told the way an African *griot* would tell it, strumming his *kora* as his audience listens raptly in the flickering glow of firelight ...

As you join Obaseki and Ndoro on their separate and ultimately converging journeys through the heart of Uhuru, you will see how deeply the author has immersed himself in the ocean of African history, folklore and mythology, and how he has rearranged those elements in an entirely new way.

I know how Milton felt as he was writing *Meji* – for I've swum in that ocean myself. Many years ago, I studied sources similar to the ones Milton has perused, and invented an alternate Africa of my own: Nyumbani, the continent though which the heroic warrior Imaro wanders. My woman-warrior character, Dossouye, lives in yet another parallel version of the Bright Continent.

At that time, I knew the potential existed for the conception of many other variations on classic African themes. A limitless number of stories were waiting to be written by other authors. Consider the dozens, if not hundreds, of ways the legend of King Arthur has

been retold. That's just one story, from one culture. Africa, with its hundreds of cultures stretching back to the beginning of humanity, offers infinite opportunities for stories of fantasy and sword-and-sorcery – or, as I prefer to call it, sword-and-soul.

In *Meji*, Milton has made full use of those opportunities. From the *kraals* of the Sesu to the desert stronghold of the Ihaggaren; from the cosmopolitan city of Mawena to the river kingdom of Tacuma, the author's vivid prose sweeps the reader along on a wave of pulse-pounding action, vivid description and agonizing moral dilemmas.

You will meet a wide array of characters as you accompany the twin protagonists on their quest to transform the Two into One – from the haughty to the humble, from the virtuous to the vicious, from the divine to the demonic. And the women of Uhuru are equal to – and sometimes more than a match for – the men.

When I first read *Meji*, I was profoundly impressed by the sheer scope of the endeavor and the narrative skill of the author. *Meji* is a story that needed to be told – and for Milton J. Davis, it is only the first of many.

Read on, and become One with the Two ...

— Charles R. Saunders

To Vickie

Your love inspires my dreams

II

A yellow moon shimmered above Sesuland, casting its hue across the rolling grasslands. Atop a low rise overlooking the Kojo River, the inhabitants of Inkosi Dingane's kraal attempted to sleep despite the unusually bright night. Restless cattle crooned at the sky, their wild brethren answering in agitated tones. Dry season had come early and pushed away the shroud of moisture obscuring the stars in the expansive sky. Soon it would be time for the Sesu to pick up their shields and assegais and march against their enemies. Dry season was war season, and the Sesu had a way with war.

The sound of cowbells and drums exploded from the royal compound beyond the cattle pen. Royal messengers dashed among the huts with wavering torches, their voices filled with excitement. The day the Sesu waited for was finally at hand; inkosi Dingane's great wife Shani was in labor.

Dingane squatted outside the birthing hut, his mind in turmoil. Every scream sent a wave of fear racing through him. Though his other wives had borne him many children, this would be Shani's first and his most glorious. This child, this boy would be his successor. Dingane took great pains to make sure he did nothing to offend the spirits during the pregnancy, lest they curse Shani's unborn child. He spent many nights awake imagining how he would raise his heir, teaching him the ways of a Sesu warrior and the secrets of the inkosi. By the time he was of age, the elders of the tribe would dare not select anyone else to succeed him. He would be by far the one most capable of leading the Sesu to future greatness.

A strange cry escaped the hut. Dingane jumped to his feet and ran to the entrance. A hand reached out and stopped him; no man,

not even the inkosi, was allowed into the birthing hut. Themba, Shani's maid, emerged.

"Send for Mulugo," she said urgently. "Something is wrong."

Dingane turned to his bodyguards and pointed to a young looking man who leaned against his spear.

"Go find Mulugo and bring him here quickly!" he ordered.

He turned back to Themba. "Is the baby in trouble?"

"I do not know," Themba replied. "Only Mulugo can answer that question."

The warrior returned with Mulugo. The medicine-priest wore one of his many masks, his mayembe clutched in his bony right hand. His brown eyes locked on Dingane, and the inkosi took a step away. He did well to hide his fear of the old priest before his warriors, though he knew his façade did not fool Mulugo. The priest gestured toward the hut. Dingane pulled aside the cloth covering the entrance, careful not to look.

Dingane crouched beside the entrance, rocking back and forth on his heels as he offered his prayers to Unkulunkulu. His son was being born and the turmoil inside sent his stomach churning in pain. Every scream sent him reeling more. Any more and he would have to send his warriors away. He must not show weakness, no matter how much he felt it.

Shani screamed again, pulling Dingane to his feet. He rushed into the hut, his heart pounding like a celebration drum. Three faces met his; the cowering gaze of the midwife, the scowl of Mulugo and the exhausted smile of Shani. Dingane smiled until he saw what his wife held. Shani had given birth to twins.

"You are cursed," Mulugo said. "You prayed for sons and Unkulunkulu has given them to you."

The joy faded from Shani's eyes. "What does he mean, Dingane? What is he saying?"

Themba placed a cool rag on Shani's forehead. "Calm yourself, my queen. Do not worry."

"Twins are an abomination, a bad omen to the tribe," Mulugo

announced. "They must die."

"No!" Shani screamed. She clutched her crying babies close to her breast.

"They are my sons!"

Her desperate eyes sought Dingane. "You cannot let him do this."

Dingane looked away from his Great Wife and glared at Mulugo. What the priest said was true, but he would not be denied a son. The fear he held for the priest dissipated.

"My sons will not die," he declared.

Mulugo held his mayembe out to Dingane, the ornate spirit-filled animal horn inches from the inkosi's face.

"You are a fool!" Mulugo replied. "You stand here naked to Unkulunkulu and deny his will for your own vanity. The Sesu chose you to lead us for your strength and wisdom, and you return our favor by damning our souls!"

"Be quiet, old man!" Dingane spat. "Do you read the mind of the Eye now?" Despite his anger he felt Mulugo's words. The Sesu followed him only as long as he protected them and their beliefs.

"No, Dingane, I do not know the mysteries of the Eye. But I know the heart of the Sesu." Mulugo shook his mayembe, and then let it drop to his side.

Dingane felt trapped. He looked into Shani's terrified eyes, at his sons searching their mother's breasts, at the ancient wisdom carved in Mulugo's face. He could not deny the Sesu, yet he could not deny Shani and himself.

"Will the spirits be satisfied with one?" he asked.

"Dingane, no!" Shani exclaimed.

"Ukulunkulu's favor is not open for barter," Mulugo warned.

"This is no bargain. Take one of the boys. The other shall live as I please."

Mulugo glared at Dingane and stormed from the birthing hut. Shani did not give up so easily.

"You can't do this, Dingane!" she pleaded. "These are our children!"

Dingane looked into Shani's damp eyes, his face set hard. Over the years he had given in to his sweet flower many times. Now there was no room to give.

"Shani, you must try to understand. This is a terrible but necessary thing. I have already asked too much when it comes to your wishes. I cannot ask anymore."

"It is so easy for you," Shani said. "You did not carry them. You did not feel your body grow plump with life, two lives. You did not feel the love grow as well."

"You are not the only one grieving," Dingane said. "But Sesu ways are strict and necessary, just as those of your people."

"The Mawena do not kill their twins," Shani snapped.

"But the Sesu do," Dingane replied.

Shani looked away from Dingane. For a long moment they both were silent, but finally Shani spoke.

"I will do as you wish, but I will choose which child will live."

Dingane nodded his head, relieved to be released from such a burden. He stood to leave the hut, but Shani raised her hand.

"I want one week to make my decision."

"It must be tonight." Dingane's voice was stern.

Shani's eyes narrowed. Her small mouth formed a rigid line as she spoke. "My son will not die a stranger to me. If he does, I will, too."

Dingane's hard look softened with fear. "Whatever you wish."

"I will see no one but Husani and Themba."

"No one," Dingane replied. "But if you choose which one to keep, I will choose his name."

Shani lowered her head. "As you wish my husband."

Dingane turned and left the hut. Mulugo waited as he emerged.

"Where is the child?" Mulugo asked.

"You will have him soon enough," Dingane replied.

Mulugo scowled, spun and stomped away muttering. Dingane

refrained from imagining what curses the medicine priest weaved against him. His first priority was to fulfill Shani's demands. He beckoned one of his warriors.

"Bring Husani to me," he ordered.

The warrior ran into the darkness and returned quickly with Husani. Shani's personal bodyguard was a tall, broad man, characteristic of the Mawena. He carried a shield and short spear, his hair cropped short in the Mawena style. There was no doubt where his loyalties lay.

"The Great Wife has asked that you stand guard of her hut during her recovery," Dingane said to Husani. "No one is to enter or leave except you or Themba."

Husani nodded in acknowledgement. With that Dingane turned away and went to his kraal.

"Husani," Shani called out. "Are you there?"

"Yes, inkosa."

"Enter, please."

The warrior stooped low and entered the birthing hut. Shani sat in the background, cradling her babies. She looked up, and then struggled to her knees.

"My queen!" Themba exclaimed, 'you mustn't!"

"Help me," Shani demanded. Themba went to Shani and helped her to her feet. Shani swayed, the pain burning through her loins as she stood full.

Themba grabbed her. "Please, inkosa, you must rest!"

Shani looked past her midwife to Husani. "You have always been faithful to me."

Husani's eyes narrowed. "What do you wish, my inkosa?"

Shani looked at them both, the fear radiating from Themba's timid eyes, the strength of Husani's stare. They would do anything she asked, each for their own reason. But they would do it. She handed the twins to Themba.

"Take them," she said. "This is Ata, and this is Atsu. Tonight you will take them to Mawenaland."

Fear took hold of Themba's face. "We cannot do this!"

“It is what our queen wishes,” Husani said, reminding Themba of her first loyalties.

Themba paced. “We will be caught. Dingane will kill us all.”

“You must leave tonight,” Shani said, ignoring Themba’s comments. “Dingane will not visit this hut for one week, nor will anyone else.”

“Not even Mulugo?” Husani asked.

“Especially not Mulugo.”

Shani saw the concern in Husani’s eyes. “I will be fine. I have enough food. All I need is rest.”

“And after a week?”

“That is in Olodurmare’s hands,” she replied. “Now go. Take my sons to our people.”

Husani bowed and went for the hut entrance. Themba did not move. Her eyes pleaded with Shani, but the inkosa was unmoved.

“Come, sister,” Husani urged. “We waste precious time.”

Themba gave Shani one more glance then hurried out of the hut, Husani close behind.

Shani stared for a moment where Themba stood holding her babies in her trembling arms. She could not cry or mourn, for the fatigue finally overcame her and she collapsed where she stood.

Mulugo sat naked in his hut surrounded by the swirling grey smoke of a smoldering dung fire. His eyes closed, he concentrated with every speck of his being to control the anger and fear threatening to break the mental dam holding back the dangerous emotions. This was not the time for random action, he thought to himself; he must marshal the weaknesses invading his mind and transform the useless energy into decisive action.

He saw his death in the eyes of the twins, just as the babalawo foretold. As a young medicine priest visiting the city of Abo, he humored himself by seeking his fortune from a decrepit babalawo whose name never remembered. The toothless man sat at the edge

of the marketplace that long ago was shared by Sesu and Mawena, offering fortunes and remedies for a handful of kola nuts.

“Two kola nuts, young Sesu,” the man coughed. “I see Fate’s web in the bones.”

Mulugo remembered how he laughed at the man, an arrogant sound expressing his contempt for everything Mawena.

“A fortune from a Mawena is worthless,” he told the old man.

The babalawo’s face went from smiling to stern. “For you, young warrior, I will read the bones for free.” He tossed the bones at Mulugo’s feet, his eyes rolling back to white.

“A great medicine priest you will become, but your path will be cleared by treachery and deceit. Power without respect shall be your reward until that day when the one who is two brings an end to your dark days.”

Mulugo felt the fire in his veins as if the words were uttered moments ago instead of the countless seasons passed. He chanted, the rhythmic words soothing the anger that lapped at the rim of his control.

“I ask for a fortune and you give me a curse,” he spat at the old man. Mulugo shoved the man into the dirt and threw the kola nuts in his face. The old man looked at Mulugo, managing to grin.

“Your life is a curse, young Sesu,” he replied. “It will be a long life, a very long life.”

The heat rose in the hut and Mulugo sweated. His life had been long. His climb to the high priest of Sesuland had been a journey of deception and cruelty, but he had done no different than any ambitious man seeking power. He never experienced the touch of a woman; the chance of eternity through children was never to occur. Still he thought the words of the beggar fortune teller mere coincidence until saw Dingane’s twins and realized the power of the old Mawena.

“The One Who is Two,” Mulugo whispered.

He had to kill them soon. Every moment they lived they grew stronger. The blood of a chief flowed through their veins, two souls

blessed by a lineage superior to his own. Though twins, he saw the difference. One cried with the soul of the world, his only concern the fear of this strange world and the hunger in his belly. The other sat quietly, his eyes drinking in the new world about him, seeing everything within and beyond a normal Sesu's sight. He was the one who had to die first, the one Mulugo would have chosen if given the chance. Dingane's weakness ruled once again and the Mawena cow had her way.

The swirling smoke came less random, moving with a pulse that claimed life from nothing. Faces appeared before Mulugo, faces of the spirits to which he offered his dark libations nightly in hopes they would strengthen him in his time of need.

"The Weak One calls," they whispered. "He has seen his death and is afraid."

"Silence!" Mulugo shouted. His ancestors mocked him, but the truth was that he was more powerful than they had ever been when they were alive. It was this new borne power that summoned his oldest uncles from the Zamani to serve him in the life they would never know again.

"The abomination is here, borne with the blood of chiefs and the power to see beyond seeing. How do I stand against this power?"

"Only one of twins can bring your demise," they sang. "Make the herbs that bring the sleeping sickness and serve it to Shani. The child eats what the mother eats. An adult will sleep, but a child will die."

Mulugo smiled. It was a simple task, something well within his powers to perform. He jumped up and ran to his shelves, selecting the perfect plants to carry out this task. The abomination would die as many other new born, and no one will be the wiser. Mulugo sprinkled the leaves into his worn stone mortar and began his task, humming a chant as he prepared his freedom.

* * *

The sun rose impatiently over the Sesu pastures, eager to get about its celestial business. Warm rays of light pierced the hut in which Dingane slept. One sliver touched the chief's face and he sprang from his cot as if burned. He leapt from the cot and bolted from the hut, spurred by the message sent to him from his ancestors while he slept.

In his dream Mulugo had defied him. The old wizard had taken matters into his own hands, invading the birth hut and killing both babies with his jagged metal knife. Shani's screams rang in his head as he neared the hut, his breathing heavy and desperate. He looked about for Husani but the warrior could not be found. Dingane yanked the hut door aside and charged in. Shani's head rose slowly from her cot, her eyes wet and red. The babies were gone. He ran, headed to Mulugo's abode, his eyes wide with anger. Striding into the wizard's hut, he found the old man sitting before a small stone table, his ancient hands slowly grinding a collection of herbs.

"Damn you, Mulugo!" he shouted. He attacked the medicine priest, wrapping his hands around the medicine-priest's neck. Mulugo struggled to speak, pounding Dingane's arms feebly. He stopped suddenly, throwing his hands out behind him and finding his cane. His breath escaping him, Mulugo touched Dingane lightly on his leg. Searing pain rushed through the inkosi's body; he released the priest and fell away, clutching his calf. Mulugo leaned against the stone table in the center of his hut, gathering his breath.

"The night has driven you mad!" Mulugo gasped.

"You killed my sons!" Dingane shouted.

Mulugo looked at Dingane. "I have not touched the abominations. I have been doing what I could to deflect whatever evils your decision has brought to us."

Dingane stood. "But they were not in the hut! Shani was crying and I dreamed..."

Dingane fled the hut, Mulugo following as closely as he could. By this time the commotion had passed throughout the village and everyone crowded about the birthing hut, curious to know what was afoot. Dingane's warriors cleared a path as the chief returned and charged inside.

Shani waited for him. She sat erect, covered in fresh clothing Themba brought her the night before, her composed face hiding her pain.

"Where are my sons, woman?" Dingane shouted. "Where are Husani and Themba?"

"Gone," Shani replied, her voice strong and firm. "The Mawena do not kill their twins."

"Do you know what you have done?" Dingane shouted. He grabbed her by the wrists and yanked her to her feet, ignoring her grimace.

"I bent the rules for you, Shani. Yesterday I defied Mulugo and the elders for you. And this is how you repay me?"

"You did nothing for me," Shani replied. "If that was so you would have spared both my sons."

Dingane let her go, his face a mirror of disgust. "I expected you to be a Great Mother worthy of this tribe. My dowry to your father was more than he asked because of what I thought you were worth. I was wrong."

"I am Mawena," Shani said. "I will not let my children die."

Dingane spat on the floor of the hut and left Shani sobbing. When he emerged Mulugo was waiting.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

"Shani sent the twins to her people."

A gasp rose from the crowd. Mulugo threw his medicine stick to the ground and pointed a crooked finger at Mulugo.

"See what has happened so soon, inkosi of the Sesu! The evil befalls us quickly."

Dingane ignored Mulugo's gesticulations, turning his attention to Gamba, the leader of his personal guard.

"Gather an impi of my finest warriors and send for my

weapons.”

“Where are you going?” Mulugo asked.

“After them,” Dingane replied. “The boys are with Husani and Themba. They had a head start, but Themba will slow Husani down.”

“I will go with you,” Mulugo decided. “We must wait no longer. When we find them, we must kill one immediately.”

“I will not slow down for you, old man”

“You will not need to,” Mulugo replied.

Gamba returned with the warriors. He helped Dingane don his headdress and strapped his shield and assegais across his back. Dingane looked over his men and was satisfied with Gamba’s choices.

“Impi kimbia!” he shouted and they set off at a warrior’s pace. Mulugo followed close behind, resting in his litter as his porters kept pace with the warriors. They ran through the streets of Selike, urged on by the chants of the Sesu. Men, women, girls and boys all shouted for their success. The throng followed them to the edge of Sesuland, and then watched as their inkosi and his warriors disappeared into the grassy horizon.

* * *

Husani gazed on the grasslands from his perch, searching for signs of pursuit. He and Themba reached the hills just before dawn, finding a place to rest before continuing their journey to Mawenaland.

He turned back, watching Themba suckle the twins, absorbed in the nurturing of Shani’s children. Though she did her best, they would never reach the Mawena. An impi was surely pursuing them by now, an impi with no woman or babies to slow them down. He had to do something if the twins were to make it to Mawenaland. What, he did not know.

“How are they?” he asked Themba.

“As well as can be expected,” she replied.

Husani crouched closer to Themba. "We must go now."

Themba glared. "The babies need more rest. I am not even finish feeding them!"

"They will have all the time they need to feed in Mawenaland," Husani replied harshly.

Themba pulled the babes from her breasts. Their feeble cries tore at her heart; she pleaded with Husani once more

"Just a few more minutes," she begged.

Husani said nothing for a moment, his mind elsewhere. When he finally turned his attention back to Themba, his expression echoed his resolve.

"Take your time, Themba. We can wait."

Themba fed the babies until they were full then placed them in the basket. She looked about for Husani but could not find him. He had apparently slipped away while she nursed. Themba sang, more to soothe herself than the sleeping twins. Death was following her; she felt its press upon her back, its putrid breath cold against her flesh. She should have fled Shani's hut as soon as the inkosa stated her intentions. But now she was part of this foolish scheme, too afraid to say no when asked.

Husani reappeared suddenly from the bush. "Are you ready?" he asked. Themba checked the babies one last time. "Yes I am," she answered.

"Good," Husani said. He took his wrist knife and handed it to Themba.

"Mawenaland is not far from the base of the hills. If you follow this path, you should reach it by sunset."

"What are you talking about?" Themba replied. "We cannot separate!"

Husani placed his hand on Themba's shoulders. "Listen to me. Dingane has surely discovered the babies are gone by now and an impi has been sent after us. Together we are too slow."

"Then we will die!" Themba exclaimed.

"No, woman, listen to me," Husani insisted. "Just inside the woods of Mawenaland is Koso. When you come across the Kosobu,

show them my knife. They will make sure you and the babies get to Abo.”

Themba realized what Husani was going to do. She never doubted his bravery, but to see him, his handsome face resolved, she then knew what a true warrior he was. She took the knife, placing it in the basket with the twins. She touched Husani’s cheek.

“I will pray for you,” she whispered.

“And I for you,” Husani replied. “Now go.”

Themba picked up the basket, trotting down the path Husani showed her. Husani watched until she disappeared, then covered her tracks. He returned to his perch and waited.

The sun hung low on the western horizon when Husani spotted the impi. They were moving fast; at their current pace they would reach the hills in minutes. Their chant reached his ears and made him smile.

“Come for me, Sesu,” he said. “You will surely get me.”

He rose and set off, climbing up a path in the hills that ran opposite of the trail leading to Mawenaland. He ran long enough to make sure the Sesu warriors would not overtake him before he reached his destination. Once he was sure of his distance he walked, saving his energy for what lay ahead.

* * *

The impi picked up the trail not far from the village. There was no rest, no easing of the pace; the Sesu had been defied and revenge was demanded. But Dingane would make sure that revenge only went so far. He would have his son.

By midday the hills that separated Sesuland from Mawenaland were in view. Dingane increased the pace, knowing the longer they traveled without seeing their prey the better their chances at reaching Abo. The warriors responded with a war chant, beating their assegais against their shields. We are coming, they chanted. We are coming for you.

Dingane led his warriors into the hills, their stride still strong

despite the miles they'd traversed. It did not take them long to find the Mawena camp.

"The ashes are still warm," Dingane remarked. It only took a moment to find the trail leading away from the Mawena camp. The impi set off again, their energy renewed.

The trail snaked upward through the hills, meandering like the gemsbok which created it. The natural growth of grasses faded with each step, usurped by low shrubs and weak trees as they drew closer to Mawenaland. The Sesu paused at the top of the hill then plunged into a dense tangle of bush and trees. The path narrowed, and the Sesu were forced to travel single file.

The slim path slowed them down considerably, the thistles from the encroaching bushes slashing their bare arms and legs. A wicked thorn bit into Dingane's calf and he dropped to his knees in pain, his hand grasping his wounded limb. No sooner had he descended that he heard a wet thump behind him. He turned to see the warrior behind him fall, an assegai buried in his chest. The others raised their shields and formed the tortoise around their inkosi, protecting him from the deadly missiles raining down on them. As suddenly as the barrage began it stopped. Dingane broke free of the formation, running at full speed through the narrow path. Fury consumed him as he looked for Husani, promising himself the Mawena would die a painful death when he was finally captured.

Husani leaped in his path. He slammed into Dingane, knocking the inkosi off his feet and into the brambles. Dingane scrambled to keep his balance, but Husani pushed him further into bush, the thorns tearing into his face and sides. The biting of the bush was punctuated by a searing stab into his right thigh. Dingane held back a scream as Husani leapt back, a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

"You will die, fool!" Dingane shouted.

"I know," Husani replied. The Mawena jumped over Dingane and charged the approaching Sesu warriors. Dingane watched Husani plunge into his men, using the narrow path to his advantage.

Five Sesu fell before Husani was finally overwhelmed, his large frame disappearing under an avalanche of Sesu blades.

The warriors freed Dingane from the shrubs. As soon as he was clear he shoved them away.

“Come! We must go.”

“Inkosi, your leg,” Gamba said.

“Are you a healer now, Gamba? Follow me!”

Dingane placed his full weight on his wounded leg and shouted. Determined to go on, he took another step. The pain overwhelmed him and he collapsed into the arms of his men.

When he awoke, he was stretched out on a hide cot, Mulugo squatting beside his leg, busily pressing the wound with a poultice. The medicine priest raised his eyes slowly to meet Dingane’s.

“It is happening as I foretold,” Mulugo said.

“Be quiet,” Dingane ordered. “I will not stop until I have my son back.”

Mulugo looked exasperated and turned his attention back to the wound. “We must go back to the kraal. Your wound is bad and I do not have the proper herbs to heal it. I did not expect to be saving a life, only taking one.”

Dingane gritted his teeth. “We are not going back without my son. Do the best you can.” He rose up on his elbows and called for Gamba.

“Make me a litter quickly,” he commanded. Gamba trotted off to do his job.

“Even you cannot deny what is happening,” Mulugo said. “Can’t you feel the unbalance? Both boys must die!”

Dingane glared at the medicine priest. “Listen to me, old man. One son will die; the other will live. If you mention this to me again, I will cut your throat.”

Mulugo looked stunned. He backed away from Dingane. “I am returning to the village. I will no longer be a part of this evil.”

“You will do no such thing,” Dingane said. “You came this far, you will go all the way. Do you understand?”

For once Dingane was privileged to see fear in Mulugo's eyes. Maybe the medicine priest thought him mad; it didn't matter to Dingane. The only thing that mattered was his son.

Dingane tried walking but the pain was too great. Gamba returned quickly with the litter. Dingane struggled in and nodded to Gamba. "I am ready."

Gamba bowed to Dingane. "Impi kimbia!" he shouted. With the command the impi fell into ranks and began the run to Mawenaland.

* * *

Themba scrambled down the goat path leading to the forest. The fear that had been held in check by Husani's presence was upon her in full fury, riding her more heavily than the babies she bore against her breasts. The sun was setting, the long shadows of the nearby forest creasing the hills. Themba would give anything to be among them, hidden in familiar darkness. But as soon as she reached them she realized she'd been too long among the Sesu. The forest engulfed her, the sky above becoming an ominous canopy of leaves.

"Oya protect me!" she prayed as she ran on.

The trail widened as it progressed into the trees, the signs of human habitation growing more numerous. Themba knew she was close to a village, but her legs would carry her no longer. She would never make it before dark; she would have to sleep in the forest. She stopped and then gingerly stepped from the trail into the bush. She found a good spot, a large tree surrounded by a stand of saplings. She put the babies down and cleared a spot to sit. The twins slept, exhausted from the journey and lack of milk.

"Poor little ones," she whispered. "Your lives begins so hard."

She woke them and offered them her breasts and they suckled eagerly. She sang to them, knowing that any sound might attract danger but too tired to care. When the babies were finished she

laid them on the blanket then lay beside them, clutching Husani's knife in her small hands.

It seemed only moments had passed when Themba jumped up, startled by harsh clanging. Sunlight broke through the canopy, stinging her eyes and frightening her even more. She found the babies and calmed somewhat, then leaned against a tree to orient herself. The clanging came from a herd of goats passing along the path, shepherded by a group of young boys. One of the boys approached her, his eyes searching the bush for the source of the scream.

"Habare!" she called out. The boy looked suddenly in her direction.

"Umzuri," the boy replied. "Who are you, mother?"

"I am Themba. I need your help."

"Wait here. I will go back to the village and bring help."

"What is your village?" Themba asked.

"Koso."

The boy ran through the brush and back to the path, calling his cohorts. Two younger boys appeared, and the eldest pointed to Themba. The boys nodded then went to her.

The younger boy took off his shoulder pouch and handed it to Themba.

"Here, eat. Paki said you looked hungry." Themba had not thought about food until that moment. She accepted the pouch eagerly.

"Are these your babies?" the other boy asked.

"No," Themba replied, her mouth stuffed with food. "They are the sons of inkosa Shani, Great Wife of inkosi Dingane and daughter of Oba Noncamba.

The boy stepped away from the sleeping children, showing his respect.

"We will protect you until Paki returns."

Themba smiled. "I am honored to have such fine warriors to watch over us."

The boys made fine company, sharing their food and

conversation. It seemed only a moment passed before the eldest boy returned, bringing with him a group of warriors from the village. The younger boys moved aside quickly, leaving Themba to confront the warriors alone. The eldest of the men stepped forward, a graying beard bordering his cherubic face, his stomach protruding past his waist belt. His left hand carried a worn shield, his right an assegai with an extremely long blade. In other circumstances Themba might have found him amusing, but the threatening look on the man's face emphasized the seriousness of her situation.

"Paki says you are Shani's handmaiden."

"I am."

"And these are her children?"

Themba nodded.

The man smirked. "Then where is the Great Wife?"

"These babies are twins," Shani replied. "The Sesu consider them abominations, and the medicine priest said they must die. Shani did not want this so she sent Husani and me..."

One of the younger warriors came forward. "Did you say Husani?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. He gave me this to show anyone who found us."

She revealed Husani's knife. The old warrior looked at the young man.

"It is his knife," the young man said. He looked at Themba. "Where is he?"

Her eyes watering as she replied. "He stayed behind to slow down the Sesu pursuing us."

The young man's face became somber, his fingers absently rubbing the cowry shells about his neck. The older warrior motioned to Themba.

"Come with us."

Koso bordered the Bose, a wide, lethargic river shadowed by trees bent lazily over its muddy waters. Cone shaped houses of wood and mud lined the narrow streets leading from the river's edge into the forest. The entire village smelled of fish. For Themba it was a welcomed change from cow dung. The warriors took her to the

meeting tree, a huge ancient plant surrounded by the village elders. The chief sat in the center, his head covered by a crown woven in the kente of his family. He seemed young for a chief, but his bearing reflected his position. Each elder wore his family kente, signifying a group of great power. She knelt, placing the basket with the babies before the elders and touched her head on the ground.

“I am Olatunde, chief of the Koso. You carry the children of Dingane?” the chief asked.

Themba felt fear in her throat. “Yes, father.”

The chief rubbed his chin. “We are not friends of the Sesu. They raid our farms and steal grain for their cattle. I have no reason to save the sons of an enemy.”

The thought of harm coming to the infants forced Themba’s fear aside. “These boys are not Sesu. They belong to Shani, daughter of Oba Noncemba, your oba. I have promised to take them to him and I will, with or without your help.”

Olatunde held up his hand. “I didn’t say we wouldn’t help you. I wanted everyone at this council to understand why we will help. We are, after all, Mawena. We are proud of the blessing Shani sends us.”

He raised his hand and the younger warrior came forward.

“Jelani will take you and the babies to Abo by boat. Dingane chases you, but the boats will take you faster. You must leave now.”

Themba bowed to the chief. “I thank you for your kindness. Shango keep you.”

Jelani led Themba to the awaiting boats. A tall, beautiful woman met her, her head wrap and dress signifying the chief’s clan.

“I am Zuwena, wet nurse for the chief’s family. I will care for the children.”

Themba clutched the babies, reluctant to give them up.

Zuwena gave the handmaiden a sympathetic smile. “It is all right. You are tired and your milk is weak.”

“Will we take the same boat?” Themba asked.

“Yes,” Zuwena replied. Themba handed the babies to Zuwena slowly, still wary despite being surrounded by people willing to help her.

“They are fine boys,” Zuwena remarked. “They will grow into great men.”

“If they live,” Themba replied.

Jelani helped Themba and Zuwena into the boat. There were three boats in all, the front and rear boat containing oarsmen and archers. Jelani prepared a place for Themba, a cot with a lambskin blanket.

“You can rest here,” he said. “If I know Husani, your journey was hard.

“He was a brave man,” Themba replied.

“I know. He was my brother.”

Themba smiled at Jelani, the resemblance now apparent. She lay down on the cot as the boats got under way. Knowing of Husani’s brother calmed her; everything would be fine; of this she was certain. Once in Abo, Oba Noncemba would handle the situation and the babies would be safe. She closed her eyes and let the rhythm of the boat lull her to sleep.

* * *

Oba Noncemba slept fitfully in the bedchamber of his palace, unaware of the crisis approaching his city. Though very much the grandfather, he had a youthful look about him despite the gray speckled hair on his head and the white beard. The privileges of higher status had not contributed to his waistline; he was as fit as his days as a warrior oba leading his armies in conquest of the kingdom now known as Mawenaland. The last decade he spent not as a warrior but a diplomat, securing the borders of his realm through trade, negotiation and marriage. Shango blessed him with few sons but many daughters and these had married the princes of the many surrounding lands, making them family. All had married well except Shani. Noncemba stirred in his sleep as he

recalled his youngest daughter which he had not seen since she married Dingane, chief of the Sesu. He did not like the young Sesu, but it was a marriage he could not avoid. The Sesu were growing numerous and powerful under Dingane's rule, rising from a small tribe of cattle raiders to a unified force. Though still not a kingdom, the young chief was powerful enough to request a bride.

Noncemba sat up in his bed just before the messenger entered.

"My oba, forgive my intrusion. You are needed urgently at the meeting tree!"

Noncemba did not question the messenger's summons. He dressed and followed the messenger through the palace and into the courtyard. The wide area brimmed with people; spectators sat upon the bleached white walls, a curious murmur drifting into the enclosure. The elders sat below the branches of the enormous baobab, a tree older than the ancestors, its canopy shielding the entire courtyard. They were flanked by his generals dressed in red kapok and chain mail, each wearing their headdress rank except Kumba, their leader and Noncemba's closest friend. Before them all a small group knelt, their heads touching the ground. Noncemba's anxiety increased as he recognized them as Kosobu. This was definitely a Sesu matter; the Kosobu lived along the river separating Mawenaland from the Sesu grasslands. As he approached them a woman lifted her head and struck the oba still. It was Themba, Shani's handmaiden, and she held twins in her arms.

"What have the ancestors blessed us with?" he whispered.

"A blessing and a curse," Kumba commented.

Noncemba walked up to Themba and knelt before her. The spectators gasped while the elders frowned at such a break in protocol.

"Are they my grandsons?" he asked.

"Yes, my oba. This is Ata and this is Atsu. The inkosa sent them to you for your protection."

Noncemba was well aware of the Sesu attitude towards twins. Many of the Kosobu were orphaned Sesu hidden among the reeds

of the river by their desperate mothers. The Kosobu found them and took them in without question.

“The Sesu will be angry,” Elder Kosoko said. The elder stood, a tall, thin man twice the age of Noncemba. His family was among the First of Mawenaland and had produced its share obas in the past.

“They will demand that we kill them.”

“Killing twins is not our way,” Kumba snarled.

“Everyone here knows this,” Noncemba replied. “This is a serious matter, one that could lead to war if not handled carefully.”

“Then let war come,” Kumba said. “For the past ten years we have danced with the Sesu. It is time we crushed them and their ambitions like dung flies.”

A whisper of approval meandered among the spectators. Noncemba’s royal stool was brought to him by his attendants. He sat before his people, returning to tribal protocol.

“One hunts the lion with skill, not anger,” he said. “The Sesu are a concern, but so are the Kossi, the Burundi and the Fah. Mawenaland is strong enough to defeat any of these lands alone, but defeating one makes us vulnerable to another. We must consider our response carefully.”

“How can we appease the Sesu without killing the twins?” Elder Kosoko asked. “They know Themba brought them here. They will come to you and ask for justice.”

“Inkosi Dingane does not want to kill them both,” Themba said.

Noncemba eyes widened in time as a gasp rose from the throng.

Themba dared to lift her eyes again. “Dingane wished to keep one for him. It is his first child from Shani. The medicine priest insisted they kill them both but the inkosi refused. Inkosa Shani told Dingane she would choose which one would live, but she sent them both to you.”

“You didn’t make this journey alone,” Kumba said. “Who helped you?”

Themba's head sagged. "Husani."

"Where is he?" Noncemba asked.

"He stayed behind in the hills to slow the Sesu impi pursuing us. He told me to go to Koso. He said they would bring me to you."

Noncemba nodded. "You have served my family well. You and the others may go to my palace and rest."

Noncemba's servants led Themba and the Kosobu into the palace. Noncemba turned to the elders.

"Dingane's desire for a son is our advantage," he said. "Come, let us prepare for our visitors."

* * *

The Sesu impi had been on the trail since morning. Despite the burden of carrying Dingane they made good time, arriving at the outskirts of Mawenaland by midday. They rested briefly, long enough to eat and quench their thirst. Then they marched again, their chants muffled by the encroaching forest.

The trail ended its meandering and widened into a well-used road. Wooden huts peered through the trees, but no people were visible. Word of the impi had preceded it, and the Mawena were staying clear. Dingane rose from his litter as they climbed a heavily forested hill, anticipating the scene about to unfold before him.

They reached the crest of the hill and Dingane raised his hand, halting the impi. Below them was the city of Abo, the heart of Mawenaland. Cylindrical wooden houses topped with conical thatch roofs peppered small plots of farmland. The plots grew smaller as the homes pushed closer to the city. In the city the dwellings consisted of stone and were grouped according to clan. Each clan enclosed its homes with white clay walls painted with the family kente. The center of this magnificent sprawl was filled by the royal compound of Noncemba. A massive stone fence encircled a large pasture filled with cattle, the wealth of many tribes before Dingane's eyes. Noncemba's hilltop palace marked the nucleus of

the royal compound. The extravagant homes of his clan members peppered the hillsides. Beside the palace the meeting tree thrived, a massive plant older than the ancestors. Below its branches the elders of Mawenaland waited.

“Put me down!” Dingane demanded.

“But Inkosi, your leg!” Gamba replied

“Down!” Dingane ordered. He was eased down slowly and stood immediately. The pain throbbed in his leg, but he ignored it. Noncemba would not see him as a cripple.

The Sesu proceeded, their wary eyes noting every movement and shadow. The streets were completely deserted; the Mawena had obviously been warned of the impi’s arrival and were prepared. As they entered the inner city, a commotion drew their attention. Mawena warriors appeared behind them and quickly closed ranks behind the Sesu, careful to stay out of spear range. Though they outnumbered the Sesu intruders, their advantage didn’t lull them into foolishness. A lion fights more ferociously when cornered; no less would be expected from the Sesu.

The gates to the royal compound were open. Mawena elders sat patiently below the branches of the meeting tree, each man draped in his family cloth pattern. In the center sat Noncemba on a gilded stool with a leopard skin cushion. He was draped with a kente robe adorned in elegant patterns of red, purple and green. A black cap studded with thick gold buttons covered his head. He wore a thick serpentine gold bracelet on his right wrist; a cluster of gold cubes tied together by a leather cord circled his left wrist. More gold cubes dangled from leather bands surrounding his ankles, spilling over his sandals. Golden rings shaped in the patterns of animals and proverbs decorated every finger. There was a time when Dingane was in awe of the Mawena. Even now it was hard for him to suppress his admiration. But time taught him the meaning of true power, which did not lie in elaborate clothing and trinkets. He was Noncemba’s equal in every way. The Sesu had become strong under his rule, strong enough for Noncemba to offer Shani to him as his great wife.

Dingane halted his warriors outside assegai distance of the meeting tree, a sign that he meant no violence.

“Mulugo, come with me,” he said to the medicine-priest.

Mulugo’s litter was lowered and the old man took his place beside Dingane. As they neared the tree, Dingane recognized Themba kneeling beside Noncemba. She had shed her Sesu garments for Mawena clothing. In her arms was the bundle that Dingane sought.

It was Dingane who spoke first. “Habare, baba.”

“Umzuri, Dingane,” Noncemba replied. “It’s been a long time, my son.”

“I am not here to chat,” Dingane replied. “I want my sons.”

“You mean your son,” Noncemba replied. On the oba’s signal Themba rose and walked to Dingane, extending the bundle. Dingane took it and turned back the cloth. There was only one child.

“What have you done?” Mulugo demanded. “Where is the other child?”

“What difference does it make?” Noncemba replied. “The child was to be killed, so we saved you the trouble.”

“Where is the body?” Mulugo asked.

Noncemba scowled. “What are you implying, magic man?”

Mulugo’s face twisted with skepticism. “You are the boy’s grandfather. Would you really kill the son of your daughter?”

Noncemba glared at the medicine priest, his hand tightening on his staff. “The blood of the Mawena is strong in my grandsons. To waste it sickens us all. But our tribes are bonded; my grandsons are Sesu and subject to your ways. Shani was wrong to send them here. We carried out your deed because of this disgrace.”

Noncemba stood, raising his staff. The Mawena warriors stormed forward, surrounding the Sesu. Noncemba smiled.

“Do not push this issue, my son. We have suffered enough with your ways this day.”

Dingane trembled with rage. He stared at Noncemba, his strength occupied by keeping his assegai in his hand.

“I need someone to nurse the child during the journey back to Selike,” he finally said, his voice trembling.

Noncemba nodded and turned to Themba. She walked to Dingane, staring directly into his eyes, her loathing for him apparent to everyone. But she was not alone. A warrior stepped forward with her, a young man Dingane quickly recognized as being related to Husani.

“Themba and Jelani will return with you,” Noncemba said. “I trust you will make sure no harm comes to them?”

“I will,” Dingane replied.

“I wish you a safe journey home,” Noncemba said.

Dingane turned away without a reply. He stormed through his warriors, the pain in his leg insignificant against the rage in his head. The Sesu warriors followed with Themba and Jelani the last of the group.

“He insulted you!” Mulugo exclaimed. “He dishonored the Sesu!”

“The Mawena are strong,” Dingane replied. “Do you see?” He waved his hand to acknowledge the numerous warriors shadowing their retreat.

“Our time will come, Mulugo,” he continued. “Mawena bone will one day shatter beneath Sesu feet. That I promise you.”

* * *

Kumba came to stand before Noncemba and fell to his knees.

“What is your command, my Oba?”

Noncemba rested his chin on his fist. “Follow them until they leave our land. I don’t want anyone doubling back. If any of Dingane’s warriors break rank, kill them.”

A wicked smile came to Kumba’s face. “It will be our pleasure to serve the Oba.”

Kumba stood and marched to his warriors, shouted the order to march. They formed ranks and trotted from Abo to catch the

Sesu.

Noncemba watched until the army left the gates of the city. He turned to his closest servant.

“Bring me my grandson.”

The servant returned with the infant wrapped in a blanket of royal kente. Shani’s son looked stared into his grandfather’s eyes with intensity beyond his few days of life.

“You must name him,” Elder Kosoko advised.

“You have your grandfather’s face and your mother’s eyes,” Noncemba said. He raised the infant over his head for all around him to see.

“Behold my grandson,” he announced. “He will be known as Obaseki Noncemba.”

The elders bowed their heads, whispering the name to the ground that held the bodies of their ancestors. Noncemba lowered the baby and smiled.

“I hope you live up to your name, little one.” Noncemba handed his grandson back to the servant then with a wave of his staff, lead the procession of elders and warriors back into the walls of the Inner City.