



# OZIOMA

## THE WICKED

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TO MOST, OZIOMA WAS A NASTY LITTLE GIRL whose pure heart had turned black two years ago, not long after her father's death. Only her mother would disagree, but her mother was a mere fourth wife to a dead yam farmer. So no one cared what her mother thought.

Now at the age of twelve, Ozioma often went for days without speaking. People stayed away from her, even her relatives. All feared what might happen to them if they crossed her. They called her witch and child sorceress, titles that were feared and disrespectfully respected in her small village of Agwotown. Of course, they only called her these powerful yet ugly names behind her back, never ever to her face. Most people wouldn't dare look deep in her dark brown eyes.

This was all because of what Ozioma could do.

You see, the people of Agwotown feared the bite of a snake far more than most Nigerians. Though the town was old, with well-built buildings and homes and a nicely controlled forest, the snakes in the area remained bold. The snakes stuck around; and for some reason, the snakes here were very, very deadly. They hid in the bushes and tall grass that surrounded homes; they safely crossed the streets at

night when there were few cars and trucks; and they moved freely along the dirt paths that led through the forest to the stream.

One would be with friends, laughing and chatting, and then with a stumbly giggly sidestep find herself in the grass. Next thing she knew, a snake would be working its fangs into her ankle. Death would usually come painfully quick, especially if it was a puff adder or carpet viper. Most people in Agwotown had lost relatives, friends, classmates, and enemies to the bite of a snake. So in Agwotown, people didn't fear the dangerous roads, armed robbers, or losing their entire bank accounts to a 419 scammer. People feared snakes. And Ozioma could speak to them.

Those who had heard the story about her doing it two years ago, couldn't stop talking about it. It was this incident that they said caused her "blackened heart," for who could commune with a snake and not be corrupted? There had been a cobra in her uncle's yam garden, and it had slithered up beside him while he tended to a root. When he turned around, he was face-to-face with the brown-hooded demon, a cobra. Ozioma happened to be coming out of the house with a bottle of orange Fanta.

She hadn't spoken to anyone in two days. "She had been in one of her moods," her uncle later told the elders when they asked about the incident. It had been a month since her father had passed and people hadn't started avoiding her yet.

"No!" Ozioma shouted when she saw her uncle face-

to-face with the cobra. She dropped the drink and ran over on her long, strong legs. Thankfully, neither her uncle nor the cobra moved. Eyewitnesses said that she then knelt down and brought her face right up to the snake's face. Her uncle was shoulder to shoulder with her, frozen in terror.

"It *kissed* her lips with its tongue as she whispered to it," her uncle later told the elders with a shudder of disgust. "I was right there but I could not make out a word she spoke." The elders were equally disgusted as they listened. One even turned to the side and spat. Nevertheless, Ozioma must have said something, because the snake immediately dropped down and slithered away.

Ozioma turned to her uncle grinning with relief—grinning for the first time since her father passed. She missed her father so much. Using the ability she'd had all her life yet only shown her parents a few times was exciting. And using it to save her uncle who looked so much like her father broke the clouds surrounding her heart and let in sunshine. She loved her uncle as she loved all of her relatives, in her quiet way.

Nevertheless, her uncle did not return her grin. Instead, he surprised her with a frown that would make even the proudest flower wither. Ozioma shrank away from him, quickly got up and went home. After that, her uncle didn't speak a word to his "evil, snake-charming" niece.

Her uncle went on to tell the elders and several of his friends about what she did, making sure to describe how

he'd been about to chop the snake in half before she came and conversed with the beast as if it were her best friend. Then these people told others and others told others. Soon, everyone in Agwotown knew about Ozioma and her wicked ways. Everyone said they saw it coming. A girl of a poor family without a father was a girl prone to witchcraft, they said. Nevertheless, the day the spitting cobra came down the giant kapok tree in the middle of the village, do you wonder who they turned to?

Ozioma was standing over the large pot of bubbling red stew humming to herself. Her mother was chatting with her aunt in the back. Her mp3 player was connected to some old speakers and it was playing an afrobeat song her father used to love. Outside, it was thundering and it would rain any minute, but that didn't concern her. She was cooking, something she'd loved to do since her mother showed her three years ago. Cooking made her feel in control, it made her feel grown.

She'd cut the onions with care, savored in the soft, firm perfection of the red tomatoes, shaken in a combination of thyme, red pepper, salt, and curry, and marveled at the greenness of the greens. She had brought out and cut up the half chicken that she'd salted, spiced, and baked hard and dry. So now she was humming and stirring slowly so as not to break up the baked chicken she'd added to the stew.

"Ozioma!"

Her eyes, which had been out of focus, lost in visions

of yummy food, immediately grew sharp. She blinked, noticing a classmate from school, Afam, standing at the window. Afam was one of the few who didn't call her "snake kisser." And once, he'd asked her to show him how to talk to snakes. She'd considered, but then decided against it. Sometimes snakes were tricky. They didn't always do what you asked them to do. Though they wouldn't bite her, they might bite Afam. Snakes liked to test the toughness of skin.

She frowned questioningly at Afam, now. She wasn't in the mood to speak to anyone today. She just wanted to cook.

"Come!" Afam said. He paused. "Hurry!"

It was the pause that got to Ozioma. And a feeling. She let go of the spoon and it sunk into the thick red stew. She ran out the door without bothering to put sandals on. The air was heavy and humid. It pressed at her skin.

She followed Afam up the road. Past Auntie Nwaduba's house, where Auntie Nwaduba had once slapped her for not greeting her loudly enough. Past Mr. and Mrs. Eferé's house, the old couple that liked to grow flowers during rainy season and hated when Ozioma got too close to them. Mr. Eferé sat on his porch in front of his tiger lilies, suspiciously watching her run by. Past her uncle's home. To the back. Through his yam garden where she'd saved him from the cobra. And finally, up the road to the center of town, the meeting place at the giant kapok tree that reached high in the sky.

Afam stopped, out of breath. "There," he said, pointing.

Then he quickly backed away and ran off, hiding behind the nearest house and peeking around its corner. Ozioma turned back to the tree just as it began to rain.

Shaped like two spiders, a large one perched upside down upon a smaller other, the thick smooth branches and roots were ideal for sitting. On days of rest, the men gathered around it to argue, converse, drink, smoke, and play cards on different branch levels.

Ozioma frowned, as thunder rumbled and lightning flashed. This was the last place anyone wanted to be during a storm. Aside from the threat of being struck, the tree was known to harbor good and evil spirits, depending on the day. Or so it was said. Today, it was clearly harboring something else. As Ozioma stood there taking in the situation, big warm droplets fell like the tears of a manatee.

It was the season where the tree dropped its seedpods. In the rain, fluffy yellow waterproof seeds bounced down like white bubbles along with the drops. Six men stood around the tree, in shorts, pants, T-shirts, and sandals. They were as motionless as the tree. Except for one. This man writhed in the red dirt, which was quickly becoming soupy like the stew she'd left to burn. The man was screaming and clawing at his eyes.

Ozioma caught the eye of her oldest brother. The son of her father's second wife, he always turned and walked the other way when he saw her coming. He stood still as a stone beside the writhing man. Ozioma didn't allow herself to look too closely at the man in pain on the ground.

She'd recognize him. She looked up at the tree and beyond it and felt her heart flip, then she felt her body flood with adrenaline. She blinked the raindrops from her eyes, sure that she couldn't be seeing what she was seeing. But she was. It was just like in the stories the local *dibia* liked to tell.

The enormous chain dangled through the heavy grey clouds between the tree's top branches. It looked black in the rain. Ozioma knew it was made of the purest, strongest iron that no blacksmith could bend. It was older than time, the ladder of the gods. And something had slithered down it.

"How many?" Ozioma asked in a low voice, addressing the man closest to her. It was Sammy, another cousin who'd stopped talking to her after the cobra incident. She was worried he wouldn't hear her over the rain but she couldn't risk speaking any louder.

"One," he whispered, water dropping from his lips as he spoke. "Very very big, o! Under the roots."

She could feel all eyes on her. Everyone wishing, hoping, praying that she would get them out of this. All these people who otherwise wouldn't see her, who refused to see her. Ozioma wished she could go back to cooking her perfect stew.

She could see the creature between a cluster of the tree's roots. Part of it, at least. She let out a slow breath. This one would take some convincing. This one was bigger than two men. It could certainly raise its forebody to her height. The better to spit its venom into her eyes. A

spitting cobra. The venom would be a powerful poison that burned like acid. Its victim wouldn't die; he or she would be blind for days and then die.

Still, if it was a spitting cobra, even the other villagers knew that this kind of cobra's eyesight was poor. And if one remained very still, it couldn't differentiate a human being from a tree. This was common Agwotown knowledge. Thus as soon as this one spit in the one man's eyes, leaving him thrashing with pain in the dirt, everyone immediately knew to freeze.

Ozioma's mother once told her that when she was a baby, Ozioma used to eat dirt and play with leaves and bugs. "Maybe that's why you can speak the snakes' language. You loved to crawl on your belly, as they do." Maybe this was true. Whatever the reason, before she even saw this snake, not only did she know it was a spitting cobra, she also knew that it was not like the others.

Slowly, Ozioma crept forward. It was watching her from between the roots. It slowly slithered out. Its face was otherworldly, that of a sly old man who has lived long and quietly watched many wars and times of peace. Beads of water ran down its head and long, mighty body.

"Ozioma, what are you going to do?" her brother whispered.

"Quiet," she said. *Only when the monsters come do they remember my name, Ozioma thought, annoyed. Now they have fear in their eyes that I can actually see because they look at me.*

Ozioma stood there in the rain five feet from the

creature, staring into its eyes, her jean shorts and red shirt soaked through. The men around her stayed frozen with fear and self-preservation. Its eyes were golden and its body was jungle green, not the usual red brown of spitting cobras. It slowly rose up and opened its hood, which was a lighter green. Still holding itself up, it glided closer while remaining upright, something that was difficult for most cobras.

Ozioma wanted to tear out of there screaming. But it was too late. She was here. It would spit poison in her eyes before she could escape. She'd put herself here. To save her people, people who hated her. Her father would have done the same thing. He'd once faced armed robbers who'd tried to rob a market. He'd been the only one brave enough to shout at those stupid men who turned out to be teenagers too afraid to wield the machetes they'd threatened everyone with.

The rain beaded on the snake's scaly head, but not one of the tree's fruits dropped on it. When it spoke, its voice came to her as it did with every snake, a hissing sound that carried close to her ears.

*Step aside. I want this tree. I like it. It is mine.*

"No," she said aloud. "This is our town tree. These are my . . . relatives."

The cobra just looked at her, its face expressionless as any animal's.

*I will kill you and all the human beings around me, then. They cannot stay motionless forever.*

"This is my home," she said. "It's all I have. They hate

me and many times I hate them but I will always love them. I won't let you harm any more of them!"

She could quietly read her favorite books. She could stand alone feeling outcast as her classmates socialized nearby. She could yearn for the love of her brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. She could look at herself in the mirror and wish she could smile with ease. And she could cry and cry for her deceased father. But she couldn't bear the idea of seeing the people of her town killed by this beast.

The snake beast's eyes bore into her and she shuddered. But she didn't look away. It brought its face, slowly, gradually, dangerously, close to hers. Then it stared. It smelled acrid and sweet, like flowers growing in a chemical spill. It opened its mouth so she could see the fangs from which the poison shot. Ozioma was screaming inside. Her skin prickled and the rain falling on her felt like blood.

Still, Ozioma stared back.

*Who are you?*

"Ozioma."

*Who are they?*

"My people."

*They hate you.*

Ozioma flinched. "The fact remains."

*You have no respect. Even now, you look me in the eye. Even now, you SPEAK to me. I may burn the meat of your head to jelly and force you to feel every part of it.*

"W . . . why do you want our tree?"

*I take what I choose. Just as I have taken that man's life.*

Ozioma didn't turn around to look at the man who was probably not in pain anymore. She held the snake's stare. She had a feeling if she broke its gaze, all was lost. "But you came from the sky."

*This tree reaches high. It touches the spirit realm. I want it.*

They stared. How many minutes had she been standing there looking into the soul of this beast? It was still raining warm drops. She could see the men with her peripheral vision. How long could they all hold still?

*You are more like me. Step aside. Let me finish them off when they can stand it no more.*

"I will fight you," she insisted. But the longer she stared, the more Ozioma could feel her nerve slipping.

*You have no poison.*

"I have hands."

*It will be a quick fight, child.*

"I'm not a child," she angrily said, her resolve momentarily strengthening. "I am twelve years old and my father is dead."

The snake inched closer, its lipless maw touching Ozioma's face. Even in the warm rain, its flesh felt dry and cool.

*If not a child, then a weak adult.*

It gave her a sharp nudge and she couldn't help herself from stumbling back, her bare feet squelching in the mud. The creature had felt solid and heavy, a million pounds of powerful muscle and sinew from the sky. All the strength she had drained from her like spilled water. She'd broken its gaze. She'd lost. She was done for. They all were. She

dug the heel of her foot in the mud, preparing to flee.

The rain began to fade. Ozioma glanced up at the sky as the deluge dwindled to drizzle. The clouds suddenly broke above the tree and even the snake looked up. The men who'd been unmoving for several minutes, took the chance to quickly scramble away. Some of them hid behind the tree, others behind houses and nearby bushes. By this time, several townspeople had gathered in these places, witnessing the whole thing.

Ozioma, however, stayed where she was. Looking, as the giant snake did, up into the break in the clouds above.

Something was spiraling through the rain like a fish through coral. She had the body of a snake, a strong feminine torso and the common face of a market woman. Ozioma fell to her knees, her mouth agape as several other people gasped and pointed and called the approaching goddess's name.

"Aida-Wedo! It's Aida-Wedo!"

"Oh my God, Ozioma has angered the goddess!"

A rainbow broke around Aida-Wedo as the rain completely stopped. The clouds rushed away like fleeing dogs at her approach. The rainbow spilled and arched over the tree.

The goddess flew to the chain, grabbed it with one hand and shimmied down to the tree's top. She wrapped her green-brown lower snake body around one of the thinnest branches as if it were the sturdiest. She leaned to the side to get a better look at Ozioma through the tree. Even her

dark brown upper body moved with the power and control of a snake. Her large breasts jiggled like ocean waves.

"*This is a fine tree,*" she said in a rich voice that probably carried to all the people in the area hiding, watching, and listening. She pointed at the snake beast and it immediately returned to the tree and began to ascend. Ozioma let out a relieved breath and slowly stood up.

When the beast reached Aida-Wedo, it leaned close and spoke to the goddess. Ozioma could hear it whispering, but she was too far to understand its words. The beast paused, looking back at Ozioma.

"*Ozioma Ugochukwu Mbagwu, do you know who this is?*" Aida-Wedo asked.

"No," Ozioma said.

"*This is Ekemini and he is one of my people.*" She laughed knowingly and the rainbow in the sky swelled, bathing everything in a marigold, tangerine, soft rose, periwinkle, and wooden green. "*And my people are powerful and rather . . . unpredictable. Do you know that you are fortunate to be alive?*"

"I didn't want it to kill anyone else," Ozioma said, hardening her voice. She motioned to the man who'd been writhing on the ground. Indeed he had stopped moving. Ozioma still couldn't see his face but it didn't matter. There was no one in her town she didn't know and who didn't know her.

The goddess said nothing as she appraised Ozioma. Ozioma stood tall. She'd just stared death in the eye for ten minutes. Even the goddess had implied it. Ozioma

felt like a goddess herself. What was death? She met the goddess's stare, but then, out of respect, she looked down. Her father taught her that she should always, always, always, respect her elders. And what was older than a goddess?

"It says that it is impressed with you," Aida-Wedo said.

*It has a funny way of showing it, she thought. Was it not about to kill me?!* She said none of this, of course. It was best not to tell the goddess what she thought of the beast who'd just killed one of her tribesmen. Ozioma was still looking deferentially at the ground when she saw the first one drop into the mud. She gasped, her eye focusing on it. She bent down, picked it up and washed it in a nearby puddle. She held it to her eye. A piece of solid gold shaped just like a raindrop. In the goddess's rainbow light, it still shined its bright perfect gold. Another fell, then another. None hit Ozioma, and hundreds covered the body of the man who'd died.

The goddess ascended up the giant iron chain before the shower of solid gold drops ended. But by then, men were running around Ozioma gathering the valuable gifts into their pockets and occasionally touching Ozioma on the shoulder. Respect, awe, apology, and understanding, all wrapped up in those wordless touches. Ozioma gathered her share, too, once she was sure the snake beast and the goddess were gone.

For the next seventy-five years, not one person in the town of Agwotown was bitten by a snake. Not until a little boy named Nwokeji who could talk to eagles tempted fate. But that is another story.