



Short Story

Àrà the Owl: The All-seeing Guardian of Ayédèrú

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Abstract

“Àrà the Owl: The All-Seeing Guardian of Ayédèrú” is an original fictional narrative written by the author, inspired by Yoruba cosmology and communal ethics. This story follows Àrà, a spiritually gifted healer and guardian, whose wisdom and vigilance sustain the moral and social balance of the kingdom of Ayédèrú. When her integrity and spiritual authority threaten corrupt power structures, she is wrongfully accused and banished from the community she has long protected. Her exile disrupts the spiritual equilibrium of the kingdom, revealing the deep connections between justice, leadership, and indigenous knowledge systems. Through the voices of truth-tellers, elders, and community members who remember her service, Àrà’s story becomes a reflection on the marginalization of healers, particularly African women, whose spiritual insight challenges unjust authority. Drawing on Yoruba cultural symbolism, oral storytelling traditions, and indigenous epistemologies, this narrative highlights themes of resistance, restoration, and communal accountability. Ultimately, this story affirms the resilience of African knowledge traditions and re-

centers the revolutionary role of women healers as custodians of justice, memory, and collective well-being.

Keywords

Nigerian folklore, revolutionary African woman, indigenous knowledge, healing, Yoruba culture.

Deep within the heart of the vibrant African kingdom of Ayédèrú stands the great Baobab of Wits, a towering tree whose sprawling branches always cast a heavy shade over the entire village square. Nestled within its gnarled hollows was Àrà, the Owl known far and wide as "The All-Seeing, All-Knowing." By day, her golden eyes pierce through the bright bustle of life below, and by night, her sharp ears absorb the whispers floating on the gentle winds. To the villagers of Ayédèrú, she is both a source of awe and an enigma; a creature who seems to know not only the secrets they share, but also the ones they hide.

Before the sun fully claims the sky, Àrà often lingers in the cool dampness of her hollow, preening her feathers with a rhythmic, meditative grace. She is not merely waiting for a crime to solve; she is a student of the wind and a keeper of the Baobab's ancient memory. To her, the tree is not just a home, but a living record of every footstep that has ever crossed the square. "The wind carries the scent of rain and the weight of a guilty heart tonight," Àrà whispered to the ancient bark of the tree. She adjusted her feathers, feeling the pulse of the Baobab beneath her claws.

She watched a young mother cross the square below, shifting a sleeping infant. Àrà felt a surge of protective warmth, a deep maternal connection to the lineage of Ayédèrú that went beyond her official duties. "They see me as a judge, but I am merely a mirror reflecting what they refuse to see in themselves. My sight is my gift to them, yes, but it is also my burden to carry alone." A village elder paused at the base of the tree, looking up with a mixture of reverence and unease. "Is the path clear today, Great Mother?" he called out softly. Àrà leaned forward, her voice a

resonant, velvet hoot that seemed to vibrate in the elder's very bones. "The path is as clear as the heart that walks it, Bàbá. Do not look to the sky for what you already hold in your hands." As the elder moved on, comforted but thoughtful, Àrà settled back into her hollow.

Ará's reputation as the arbiter of justice began long ago when a wave of fear swept through Ayédèrú. The King of Ayédèrú, Ọba Adéwọlé's, precious cowrie shells had vanished without a trace, leaving the villagers in turmoil. From her lofty perch, Àrà had observed the faint shimmer of the shells clutched tightly in the hands of a shadowy figure sneaking through the moonlit paths. By dawn, she shared her discovery with the king and the village elders, ensuring the treasures were recovered. The culprit was a young Èrú. As a servant in the palace, he had hoped the shadows would hide his desperation, but Àrà's eyes saw through the dark as clearly as the morning sun, and he was brought to book. Whenever the villagers faced mysteries too twisted to untangle, be it the disappearance of livestock, the strange illness of crops, or the eerie cries heard in the forest; they would turn their gaze to the mighty Baobab. Àrà had never failed them. Her wisdom, sharpened by years of vigilance, unveiled the darkest of truths, and her unyielding justice earned her a place in every fireside tale.

"Why do you watch us so closely, Mother of the Night?" a young girl had once asked, peering up at the Baobab. Àrà responded. "Because, little one, truth is like the roots of this tree. It may be buried, but it is what keeps us standing. I do not just watch; I remember. I remember who we are when we think no one is looking."

But, Àrà's role was not always unchallenged. Among the villagers are those who live in fear of her knowledge: the evildoers whose schemes she has exposed. They began to share whispers of silencing the Owl who sees too much, plotting ways to end her reign as the kingdom's secret keeper. Yet, Àrà remained steadfast; her very presence a warning to all who would dare disrupt the peace and harmony of Ayédèrú. The people whom Àrà has exposed their evil schemes in the village include: Akíntúndé, the Blacksmith; Àṣàkẹ, the herb seller daughter; Alári, the only daughter of the Ọjẹ, the only masquerade family in Ayédèrú; Ifàbìyí, the son of the Ifá Chief priest; and some of the Ayé meṣí—who are the seven kingmakers of the Ayédèrú kingdom. They decided to come together in order to put an end to the reign of Àrà. Their scheme

was to conspire to implicate her during the Festival of Drums by having the Royal Ọpá, the royal staff of Ifá, removed from the palace, and then have it planted in Arà's Chamber when she went to the neighbouring village to get some herbs for the festival, which was fast approaching.

The grand Àafin, home of the Ọba, was a spectacle of cultural brilliance as the Festival of the Talking Drums reached its peak. The rhythmic beats of the bàtá and dùndún drums carried stories of heroism, unity, and ancestry through the palace courtyard, where villagers swayed in harmony to the pulsating sounds. The maidens of the village, adorned in vibrant waist beads, moved gracefully; their ẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ in hand, shaking the beaded gourds shake to the rhythm, as they sang in praise of the king.

“Ọba o o o, Ọba o

“O King, O King

Ọba o o o, Ọba o

O King, O King

Ọba Adéwólé, maye dẹ̀rùn fún wa láyédèrú o
in Àyédèrú

King Adewole, makes life for us

Ọba Adéwólé, maye dẹ̀rùn fún wa láyédèrú o
in Àyédèrú

King Adewole, makes life for us

Ọ̀ṣà òkè dá bàbá sí fún wa.”

Creator above, grant him long life for us.”

Then came the sacred moment: the unveiling of the Royal Ọpá Ifá, an ancient divining staff blessed by the ancestors. Without it, the festival could not be concluded. It was the heart of the ceremony; the bridge between the living and the spirits. But, when the Chief priest entered the sacred chamber to retrieve it, terror gripped the palace. He noticed that the Ọpá Ifá was missing. Gasps of disbelief rippled through the crowd when he shared this grave news. Fear took hold of them, for without the staff, the spirits could not be honored properly, and the kingdom risked being visited with the wrath of the ancestors. Murmurs of suspicion and blame spread like wildfire. As the night sky darkened, the conspirators became more emboldened.

Then the evildoers spoke up, claiming to know who had stolen the Royal Ọpá Ifá. They pointed directly at Arà from the crowd. The King, the villagers, the palace guards, and even Arà herself exclaimed in disbelief. Next, Ifábìyí, son of the Ifá Chief priest, stepped forward. His voice was steady as he addressed the king, “Ọbá Adéwọlé, k’ẹ pẹ láyẹ o,” he said, wishing the King a long life. “If you do not believe us, send two of your most trusted guards to Arà’s chamber. If you do not find the staff there, behead me.”

A shocked cry erupted from the crowd. The King raised his hand, silencing them all. He agreed to Ifábìyí’s demand, accepting his condition, and sent his guards to ransack Arà’s chamber. The guards arrived at Arà’s dwelling in the Baobab tree. They searched thoroughly and to their utter disbelief, found the Royal Ọpá Ifá hidden beneath the nest. Returning to the palace in shock, they presented their findings.

Ará, known for her wisdom and unyielding devotion to truth, had recently uncovered corruption among the palace guards and influential citizens of Ayédèrú, exposing elders who conspired to hoard wealth meant for the villagers. But, in revealing their misdeeds, she had unknowingly made powerful enemies. And now, during the most sacred festival, she had been framed. The odds were stacked against her even as the cries of protest rang through the crowd. Then, Ọdẹwọlé, the bravest hunter, a fearless young observer noticed something amiss—the torn fabric of Akíntúndé’s robe; the glances exchanged between guilty men; and the hidden smirk in the shadows. He had seen signs like these before. Arà had been betrayed, and the real culprits would remain in the shadows, unseen for now.

Àrà could not believe her eyes. As she tried to prove her innocence, the Àyé meṣí would shush her, commanding her to remain silent until the verdict was passed. The king sat speechless; he did not know what to do, for he trusted Àrà deeply. "Àrà is a source of joy, peace, and comfort in Ayédèrú. Why would she steal the staff that brings balance to the kingdom, knowing that without it, calamity will follow

calamity?" The king thought to himself, troubled. Determined to handle the situation properly, the king ordered a meeting to decide Àrà's fate. The Balógun, however, wasted no time commanding the guards to throw Àrà into the túbú, the dark palace prison.

When the meeting commenced, the three most respected chiefs, Başorún, Balógun, and the Ìyálóde, exchanged glances and smiled knowingly. The king turned to them, his voice steady. "Èyìn Àyé meşí," addressing all the seven king makers, then he continued, "looking at the issue before us, what do you all think we should do? Should we let her go and treat this as a warning, so she does not commit such a crime again?"

The chiefs chorused a resounding "No!" before Başorún stepped forward. "Haba!, Kábíyèsí!" Referring to the king, "Someone commits a grave crime, and you suggest mercy? Do you not understand the gravity of her actions? She meant nothing but harm for this kingdom, our forefathers built this land with sweat and sacrifice!" Ìyálóde raised her voice in agreement, "Kábíyèsí, Àrà is evil. You know, that if the Festival of the Talking Drums is performed without the Royal Opa Ifá, there will be no peace, no tranquility, no balance. The young and old will start dying. Famine will come, and plagues will sweep through the land! Kábíyèsí, we must banish her."

The king frowned, considering their words. "My chiefs, many have committed crimes in this village, yet we did not banish them. This woman has only erred once, and we must remember that she has been of great help to this kingdom. Should we cast her away so easily?"

Balógun scoffed. "Kábíyèsí, we are the Àyé meşí. We placed you in your position because we know you are wise, and that you understand good from evil. Without the staff, we are nothing! It is your love for this so-called Àrà that gave her the privilege to enter the palace freely, and now she has had the audacity to steal the Royal Opa Ifá! Do you not know that if a king loses this staff, within three days he will be dethroned? And whoever finds it, no matter their status, will be crowned king! Kábíyèsí, do you not see? Ará, whom you so dearly love, seeks to dethrone you!"

The Ọtún and Osí also succumbed to the pressure, nodding in agreement. Ọtún turned to the king, "Kábíyèsí, what shall be the verdict for this ingrate? This slave whom we raised as a child?" The king sighed and summoned the head of the guards to fetch him the town crier. "This verdict must be made public. Tell him to gather all my people at the palace before nightfall tomorrow."

Before the evening on the next day, the entire village gathered, anxiously awaiting the verdict. The Àyé meşí arrived at the king's court, appearing celebratory, some even dressed extravagantly, as if attending a wedding. The king took his throne and greeted his people. "My dear people of Ayédèrú, we all know why we are gathered here. There is no need for long speeches, I wish to make this quick, for I have other matters to attend to. Olóri Eşo, bring me the criminal." The head guard and several others rushed to the túbú, dragging forth Àrà. She was frail and her feathers matted with the dust of her cell; but, as she stood before the gathered villagers, her golden eyes did not flicker with the fear her accusers expected. "Is this the price of truth in Ayédèrú?" Àrà wondered, her mind racing even as her body failed.

As she entered the king's court, murmurs rippled through the crowd. The king silenced them with a raised hand. "Ótó!" telling the crowd that it is enough. His voice rang across the courtyard, commanding their attention. "This woman has not only broken the trust we placed in her, but she has also shamed her lineage. She descends from good people, yet she has chosen to be the black sheep, the Judas among twelve! She seeks to bring calamity upon our kingdom. And so, before she succeeds, I declare my verdict." The crowd held its breath.

"Àrà will be banished from this kingdom. She and her future generations shall never set foot in Ayédèrú again. Any person who associates with her shall also be exiled." At once, the king rose and left the court, unwilling to hear further protests. Àrà was dragged from the chamber and escorted by guards to the village border, where her fate was sealed. Among the crowd, some villagers: Akíntúndé, the Blacksmith; Àşàkẹ, the herb seller's daughter; Alári, of the Ọje family; Ifábiyí, the son of the Ifá chief priest; and others rejoiced. Yet, others wept, some silent in sorrow, and others were too stunned to speak.

The judgment had been made. The kingdom had chosen its path.

As Àrà was dragged into the forest, Ọdewọ́lé followed discreetly. When they reached the border, Àrà was pushed to the ground like a bag of cocoa beans. The head guard spoke: "This is where we part ways with you. We're going back to the village. The left path leads to Àyédún village, while the right leads to Ọgbá village. You can choose either of them. You heard what the king said, never step foot in Àyédèrú again. Goodbye." With that, the head guard and the rest of the guards returned to the village.

Àrà lay on the ground, frail and weak. She could not even call for help; her throat was parched from thirst. She could not fly because Balogún had secretly ordered the guards to break one of her wings without the king's authorization. He also enforced a cruel "no food and water" policy.

As the guards' footsteps faded, Ọdewọ́lé emerged from his hiding place and carried Àrà to his hunting hut in the forest. Since night had fallen, it was the safest place to stay. He cleaned Àrà's wound, gave her food, water, and a painkiller. For the first time in days, Àrà slept like a baby.

By morning, Àrà awoke to find herself alone. Ọdewọ́lé was nowhere in sight. She was still in pain, unable to move and searched for her mysterious helper. "I couldn't even recognize his face," Àrà thought. "It was so dark, and I was too weak. I couldn't even thank him. Why did he leave? Was he afraid of what the king said about associating with me? Oh, Creator! Come to my aid." Shortly after, Ọdewọ́lé returned with food, water, and fruits, which he handed to Àrà. "Young man, why are you helping me?" Àrà asked, taking the food. "I do not know you, and I don't think I've ever helped you in any way. Why do you help me?"

Ọdewọ́lé laughed.

"My name is Ọḍẹwọ́lé. I'm a hunter. You don't need to have helped me before I do the same for you. You might not know me, but I know you very well. You helped my mother uncover the person who poisoned her crops with disease. Since then, I've been rooting for you." He continued, "In life, one good turn deserves another. Besides, I know you're innocent of the crime you're accused of, and I'm ready to help you solve this mystery and bring the real offenders to justice." Tears welled in Àrà's golden eyes. "Thank you, Ọḍẹwọ́lé," she wept. You're the only person who believes I didn't commit that crime. I know theft is wrong, that's why I always bring thieves to justice. Why would I steal? Secondly, I know how valuable and precious the Royal Ọpá Ifá is to the kingdom. Why would I take it?"

Ọḍẹwọ́lé consoled her.

"You can stay here. This place is safe, and I'll bring you food and water every three days. I don't want anyone, not even my family, to know I am helping you. Stay safe and stay out of sight. Other hunters come into the forest to hunt. When I return in three days, we'll talk properly. Get well soon."

And so, they bid each other farewell.

Ọḍẹwọ́lé kept his promise, visiting Àrà every three days with food and water to sustain her until his next visit. Each time he arrived, he stayed to keep Àrà company; they would talk, laugh, and share stories, making the forest hut feel a little less lonely. Àrà never failed to express her gratitude, thanking Ọḍẹwọ́lé for his kindness and praying for his well-being.

One evening, as Ọḍẹwọ́lé made his way back from the forest, he passed Baṣọrún's compound. A lively feast was underway, and seated around the table were Akíntúndé, Àṣàkẹ, Alári, Ifábiyí, the Ìyálòde, and Balogún—all figures of authority and influence in the village. Curious, Ọḍẹwọ́lé slipped into the compound unnoticed and climbed the tallest tree near their gathering, positioning himself perfectly to eavesdrop.

On the table sat bowls of roasted meat, palm wine, bitter kola, and kolanuts. The group ate and drank with ease, their laughter filling the night air. Moments later, Başorún arrived; his energy boisterous and triumphant. He took his seat, poured palm wine into every cup, and then stood to raise a toast. "My people, as the most powerful in this village, we are destined for greater things. We deserve a lifetime of riches! But one pitiful, wretched little fool with eyes like Àşàkẹ's concoction pot tried to ruin us, she wanted to end our prosperity, claiming what we do is wrong!" He sneered and took a sip before continuing, "But now, we have succeeded in chasing her out of our lives! Is this not worth celebrating? Cheers to accumulating wealth forever!" The group erupted in agreement, raising their cups and drinking with satisfaction.

Akíntúndé smirked as he broke the silence. "I remember when I drained my blacksmith cooling water into people's farms, killing their crops. Those same villagers came to me seeking a cure, which I gladly sold for a hefty price. Àrà exposed me to the king and the entire village, he ruined my business, that ugly creature!" He spat on the ground in disgust. Balogún nodded. "When Ìyálòde, Başorún, and I collected high taxes from the villagers and demanded a quarter of their harvest every year, Àrà meddled and exposed us!"

Àşàkẹ leaned forward, her voice full of venom. "I would sneak into farms at night, poisoning their crops with my herbs, then sell them the cure in broad daylight. But that wretched Àrà caught me red-handed and revealed everything. Since then, I vowed to see her downfall." Ifábiyí chuckled darkly. "Before Àrà could expose Alári and me as the thieves behind the missing livestock, I arranged for the meeting where we plotted to implicate her. We had to get rid of her before she destroyed all of our businesses!"

Laughter filled the air, and Ìyálòde nodded approvingly, "You are very wise."

Ọdẹwọlé, still perched in the tree, felt his stomach twist in shock. "So these are the people we respect? The ones who dictate our village's affairs? They are the true

culprits, exploiting the people for their own greed. And they framed Àrà, an innocent soul to protect themselves."

He waited in silence, watching as each conspirator returned to their homes. Once the compound was deserted, he swiftly climbed down and dashed into the forest, his heart pounding. Àrà needed to hear the truth. That night, Ọdẹwólé raced through the thick undergrowth; his heart pounding against his ribs. The forest was alive with whispers: the rustling of leaves; the distant calls of nocturnal creatures; and the eerie stillness that came with secrets too heavy to bear. As he approached Àrà's hidden refuge, the moon cast silver streaks through the swaying branches of the iroko tree, illuminating the sorrow etched on Àrà's weary face. "Àrà..." Ọdẹwólé breathed, his voice strained with urgency.

Àrà turned, her golden eyes reflecting both hope and dread. Ọdẹwólé wasted no time; he recounted every detail from the village's suffering to how she was framed. Every word struck like a hammer upon stone; each revelation deepening the weight pressing upon Àrà's shoulders.

And then, silence.

Ọdẹwólé knelt beside her, placing a firm, reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You must stay strong, Àrà." His voice was gentle but resolute. "You are not defeated. Not yet."

Àrà turned to him, her eyes brimming with sorrow; yet, behind the despair, a flicker of determination remained. They sat beneath the looming shadow of the iroko tree, its roots entwined with forgotten wisdom, as they whispered their vow.

"Until the time is right."

Their oath sealed the stillness.

The stars shimmered above, distant observers of fate's unfolding story. And deep within the forest, a wind stirred, the kind that carried change.

At first, the sickness was subtle; children complained of weakness, their eyes losing their sparkle. Then, it worsened. One by one, they fell ill; their frail bodies burning with fever. Their terrified parents ran helter-skelter, searching desperately for a cure; but, none was found.

The Ìyá Àbíyè homes, which are the sanctuaries of healing, were overflowing with sick children. The cause of their illness was unknown. The cure was unknown. The Ìyá Àbíyès themselves were confused, helpless, and exhausted, unable to decipher the source of this affliction or how to treat it.

With fear and desperation gripping the hearts of parents and healers alike, they summoned the Ifá priest, Ifáléké, to seek guidance from the gods. Ifáléké, wise and revered, gathered his sacred instruments; lit the ancestral flames; and called upon the spirits. The flames flickered violently; the smoke curling into cryptic shapes. Then, the gods spoke. "The missing star must be found."

Ifáléké frowned. "The missing star?" he whispered. "Dear gods, what you say baffles me. These children's lives are at stake, and you ask us to search for a missing star?" Frustration gnawed at his heart. This was no ordinary sickness; something ancient and ominous paws at play. As dawn broke, shouts erupted from the outskirts of the village. A group of farmers sprinted toward the palace, their eyes wide with terror.

"The gods are angry!" one of them screamed. "Something that has never happened in ages has just occurred, the crops have dried up overnight! The livestock have vanished without a trace!" Panic seized the villagers. Mothers wept in their homes, their voices rising in sorrow. Fathers stared at the barren fields in despair. The air, thick with tension, carried an unnatural stillness. The once-thriving kingdom of Ayédèrú, protected under Àrà's watchful eyes, now felt fractured, wounded, and abandoned. Signs of misfortune crept in like shadows. Livestock vanished; their footprints erased as if swallowed by the earth. Crops withered, despite clear skies and fertile soil. The streams began to dry up, their once glittering waters reduced to mere puddles. Children who had not fallen ill woke up screaming, haunted by dreams they could not explain. Even the Baobab of Wits, the ancient guardian of wisdom, showed signs of distress. Its once lush leaves drooped, burdened by an invisible shadow.

Whispers spread through the village like wildfire. Some claimed the spirits were punishing them for forsaking their traditions. Others murmured of dark sorcery, unseen forces at work. The kingdom fell into chaos. Fear gripped the villagers, the elders, and even the king himself.

Ọba Adéwólé, once a ruler of certainty, now brooded day and night, searching for answers to the calamity that had befallen his people. The Oracle's message remained unchanged: "Find the missing star. Only then will your suffering end." But, who or what was this missing star? If they failed to find it, the Oracle warned, Ayédèrú would cease to exist.

As the calamity deepened, Ifáléké, the chief priest, made a decision. If the answers could not be found within Ayédèrú, they must be sought elsewhere. Under the cover of dawn, Ifáléké set forth to the neighboring village of Ọgbá, where the great priest Ifátúnde resided; a man known for his unparalleled wisdom and powerful connection to the gods.

Upon reaching Ifátúnde's sacred chambers, he was met with warmth. "Ah, my brother! It has been long!" Ifátúnde exclaimed, embracing Ifáléké. The two priests exchanged pleasantries before Ifáléké, desperate for answers, laid bare the suffering of Ayédèrú. Ifátúnde listened in solemn silence. Then, he sighed. "Let me ask the Oracle." He knelt before his shrine, whispered incantations, and awaited the divine response. The gods spoke once more. "The missing star must be found." Ifátúnde furrowed his brow. "Who is the missing star?" he asked.

The flames of the shrine burned brighter. The ground trembled slightly beneath them. Then, the Oracle answered: "Go find the banished one, she alone will unravel the mystery that plagues Ayédèrú." Ifáléké gasped; his heart raced. It all makes sense now. The missing star was Àrà. The woman they had cast away. The woman falsely accused. The woman whose absence had unraveled the balance of the land. Without wasting another moment, Ifáléké gathered his staff, his robes billowing in the wind, as he hurried back to Ayédèrú. This time, he was no longer confused. He carried the missing piece of the puzzle: Ará must return or Ayédèrú would fall.

By nightfall, he reached the village, rushing straight to the palace. Breathless, he relayed the divine message to the king.

The king's eyes widened. His grip faltered, and the horsetail in his hand slipped to the floor. His body trembled; his voice unsteady. "You mean Àrà is the cause of our predicament?" Ifáléké shook his head. "No, Àrà is not the cause of our suffering, but she alone can save us. The Oracle has spoken, only she can remove us from this plight."

The weight of the truth hung thick in the air. Without hesitation, the king summoned the head guard. "Àrà must be found before the next market day," he commanded. "Place a bounty upon her, whosoever finds her shall receive three bags of cowries."

As the head guard departed, the king called for the town crier, ordering him to spread the message throughout the village before dawn. By morning, the search would begin.

The next day, the palace guards split into two groups: one marched toward Ọgbá, the other toward Àyédún. It was a massive search effort; but, despite their relentless pursuit, Àrà remained nowhere to be found.

The news reached Ọdẹwọlé. The fate of Àyédèrú lay in Àrà's hands, and the urgency was undeniable. Without delay, Ọdẹwọlé sprinted to the forest, his pulse racing. Upon reaching Àrà, he wasted no time recounting every detail, from the suffering of the village to the ominous prophecy of the Oracle. Each word struck like a hammer against stone; each revelation deepening the weight upon Àrà's chest. She staggered back, with breath shallow and mind clouded by the painful truth. Her kingdom, the land she had loved, protected, and been cast away from, teetered on the brink of ruin. Her people suffered; yet, her name remained tainted among them.

"Àrà," Ọdẹwọlé urged, "the bounty upon you is immense. Before anyone finds you, go to the king. You are the only one who can restore peace."

Tears welled in Àrà's eyes.

"They search in vain," she murmured. "The people go without food and water, yet the king sends them on a bounty as if money can fix everything. But money is not everything."

She drew a deep breath, her resolve strengthening. "I will not go to the palace. I will go straight to the chief priest. Only then will I know how to truly bring peace to my beloved village."

Ọdẹwọlé nodded, understanding the depth of Àrà's conviction.

"Then I will go with you," he said.

And so, side by side, they set off toward Ifáléké: toward answers and toward redemption.

At dawn, Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé set out on their journey to Ifáléké's compound in Ayédèrú. The air was crisp with the promise of revelation, and every step carried the weight of fate.

As they arrived, they spotted Ifáléké just as he was about to step out. The moment his eyes fell upon them, he froze, utterly flabbergasted. "Àrà! You have returned!"

His voice trembled with shock and urgency. Without hesitation, he ushered them inside, calling one of his Ifá apprentices. "Go to the palace immediately. Tell the king that Àrà is back."

The apprentice rushed off, leaving Ifáléké to guide Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé into his sacred Ifá chamber. "Sit," he instructed, gesturing to the floor.

Before consulting the Oracle, Ifáléké turned to Àrà, his expression grave. "Who is this man? Do you trust him? What I am about to ask the Oracle, and the answer it will give, must not reach a third ear. But if you trust him, I will proceed." Àrà smiled reassuringly.

"His name is Ọdẹwọlé. He is a hunter in our village, though he lives near the outskirts. And yes, I trust him completely. You may continue."

Ifáléké nodded and took a deep breath. He knelt before the shrine, his hands steady, and his voice firm. "Ifá, we have found the missing star, just as you commanded. Now, what is the way forward?" The air shifted, thickening with unseen energy. The flames of the shrine danced wildly, and the ground trembled with an eerie pulse.

Then, the Oracle spoke: "All who framed Àrà must confess before three days, or they shall lose their lives. Once they reveal the truth, Àrà must go to her baobab tree. There, she will find the answer to the kingdom's ordeal."

Àrà's heart pounded, but relief washed over her. She smiled, whispering to herself, "Thank the Creator, I am not the cause of the village's suffering. I am merely the way finder. And at last, those who framed me will face their disgrace." As Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé stepped out of the chamber, they saw the king and his guards approaching the compound. They waited.

The king entered hurriedly; his regal composure shattered the moment his eyes met Àrà's. Without hesitation, he ran to her. "Àrà! Please, forgive me!"

His voice cracked, pleading. "I am so sorry for banishing you. The Àyé Mẹsí were too demanding, they threatened me. They said they put me in this position because they believed I was wise. I had no choice but to follow their orders. But I was wrong! You are nothing but a blessing to us. The village has fallen into chaos! Please, save us. I cannot let my kingdom go extinct. It did not happen in my father's time, nor in my forefathers', and I refuse to let it happen in mine. Please, help us!" Àrà smiled, her eyes kind yet resolute.

"My king, I hold no anger toward you, and I never will. Theft is a serious crime, and you had to act. But now, the truth is unraveling, and I will do everything in my power to restore balance to our kingdom." The king turned to Ifáléké, his voice desperate. "What did the Oracle say?"

With unwavering composure, Ifáléké relayed the divine message. The king listened, his jaw tightening with determination. "Those people will pay!" he declared. "I will summon the town crier at once! He will spread the Oracle's decree throughout the village. Those culprits must reveal themselves before the third day."

Satisfied, Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé stepped away from Ifáléké's compound smiling, their next destination clear.

The town crier moved swiftly through the streets of Ayédèrú, his voice booming across the village as he relayed the king's message. "Let it be known! The missing star has returned! Justice will be served!" The villagers reacted in waves; some cheered with joy while others stood speechless, their minds struggling to reconcile the truth. Àrà had returned, and even more shocking, the Royal Opa Ifá had never been stolen by her. For the first time in weeks, hope stirred.

Two days later, in the grand palace courtyard, Akíntúndé, Àṣàké, Alári, Ifábìyí, Ìyálòde, Baṣorún, and Balógun stood before the gathered crowd; their faces tight with shame.

The king watched them in silence; his expression unreadable. Then, one by one, the evildoers spoke. "We... we plotted against Àrà," Baṣorún muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

"We planted the staff in her chamber," Alári added, trembling. The crowd gasped in horror, voices rising in disbelief. Ifáléké, the chief priest, clutched his robes tightly, his body shaking as he turned toward Ifábìyí, his own son, his own blood. "Ifábìyí..." he breathed, his voice laced with shock. The young man lowered his gaze, unable to meet his father's eyes.

"You are nothing but a stranger to me now," Ifáléké continued, his voice cold, his heart broken. "A son of the Ifá lineage would never betray his people. I accept whatever judgment the king passes on you!"

Murmurs spread like wildfire. The villagers whispered, shaking their heads, struggling to comprehend that the most powerful figures in the kingdom had conspired against an innocent woman. The Oba raised his hand, calling for silence.

"I will not be the one to pass judgment," he declared. "That right belongs to Àrà."

The crowd turned in unison, eyes searching for the great Bird who had suffered the greatest injustice. Slowly, Àrà stepped forward, emerging from the sea of villagers. She kneeled before the king, and then turned to face the people. "Kábìyèsí," she said humbly, "I am grateful to the Creator and to Oḍewólé, who has proven himself a true savior of this kingdom. Today, I stand not as a judge, but as a woman who has endured great pain." The crowd listened in silence, the weight of her words settling

over them like a heavy mist. "I have forgiven those who wronged me," Àrà continued, her voice steady. "But I am not the king, I have no right to pass judgment. My lord, I leave the decision in your hands."

The king nodded; his gaze firm. He rose from his throne, his royal robes billowing as he spoke, "Then hear my verdict, you are all banished from this kingdom! Your actions have threatened the balance of Ayédèrú, and such betrayal cannot go unpunished! And for the great pain and shame Àrà suffered, all the properties that these evil people gathered from their evil agenda, now belongs to Àrà." A wave of uproar erupted as the evildoers fell to their knees, crying for mercy. But, the king did not waver—he turned on his heels, leaving the court without hesitation. His judgment was final. The villagers rejoiced, celebrating the restoration of justice. As the cries of the banished conspirators faded into the distance, Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé exchanged knowing smiles. Their true journey was only beginning.

They left the palace together, ready to begin their quest to resolve the village's calamity.

The night air was crisp as Àrà and Ọdẹwọlé made their way toward the Baobab tree; their hearts heavy with anticipation. The forest hummed with life; crickets whispered their songs; and the rustling leaves carried mysteries yet untold. As they walked, three women dressed in white appeared before them; their flowing garments glowing faintly beneath the moonlight. Their presence was both ethereal and commanding, as though they had stepped through time itself.

Ará and Ọdẹwọlé greeted them respectfully and prepared to continue their journey; but, the women called out, their voices laced with wisdom. One of the women turned toward Àrà, her piercing gaze locking onto hers. "My daughter," she said gently. "We have seen your pain, your struggles, and your resilience. We know how deeply you love this kingdom and how willing you are to save it. We are here to help you." The second woman stepped forward, her voice firm. "Yes! We will help you. We will give you three cowries. When you reach the Baobab, search carefully, you will find the place where they must be installed." The third woman extended her hand,

presenting the cowries. They shimmered, glowing like polished diamonds beneath the moonlight. "Take them," she murmured, her voice carrying the weight of ancient power. "May the Creator and your ancestors guide you." Àrà reached out slowly, taking the cowries into his palm. A warmth spread through her fingers, as though the very spirits of Ayédèrú whispered through them. But, before Àrà could offer her gratitude, the women vanished, their forms dissolving into the night like mist carried by the wind.

Silence hung between Àrà and Ọḍẹwọlé, but neither questioned what had just happened. Their purpose was clear. They pressed forward, a new sense of hope illuminating their path.

Under the fading moonlight, Àrà and Ọḍẹwọlé arrived at the towering Baobab tree, the ancient guardian that had stood watch over Ayédèrú for generations.

Without hesitation, they began searching, circling the tree, feeling its coarse bark, seeking the hidden space the women had spoken of.

Hours passed. Their fingers brushed every curve, every groove, but nothing seemed to fit.

Then, just as frustration threatened to take hold, Ọḍẹwọlé shouted cheerfully, his voice breaking the silence.

"Àrà! I found it!"

Àrà hurried to him. At the base of the Baobab, nestled within the roots, lay a faint engraving, almost invisible to the untrained eye. Taking a deep breath, Àrà placed the cowries into the carved indentations.

The moment they touched the tree, a symbol emerged: a shape she had seen before, yet could not remember. Her heart tightened with unease. "Ọḍẹwọlé," Àrà murmured, pointing at the symbol, "Have you seen this before?"

Ọḍẹwọlé studied it carefully, his brows furrowed. "No," he admitted.

As they puzzled over the mystery, a burst of light erupted from the symbol, illuminating the tree's bark.

The Baobab trembled, its roots shifting, opening a hidden path leading deep into the forest. Without hesitation, Àrà and Ọḍẹwọlé stepped forward, their journey was far from over.

The hidden path led them to an ancient shrine, long forgotten beneath the forest canopy.

Inside, relics of a lost era lay scattered; a crescent-shaped artifact glowing faintly; and a tablet inscribed with cryptic warnings.

Then, the forest stirred.

The shadows twisted, converging like smoke gathering into form, revealing the ancient adversary: Aríwó.

A spirit of chaos and discord, long sealed by Àrà's Ancestors.

The ground trembled as Aríwó spoke, its voice a thousand overlapping whispers, chilling and relentless. "You have come far, but it is too late," the spirit hissed. "I will shroud Ayédèrú in eternal fear. The neglect of your ancestors has weakened my seal, and now, I shall rise!"

Darkness swept across the shrine, warping reality itself.

Branches snarled, stretching like monstrous claws.

Illusions took shape, twisting Àrà's senses, clouding her mind in doubt.

Her binaural hearing and binocular vision, once her greatest strengths, now faltered in Aríwó's realm of chaos.

Ọḍẹwọlé's ingenuity proved crucial.

Among the illusions, he spotted something: a pattern in the deception, flickering inconsistencies that Aríwó had overlooked.

“Àrà, focus on what is real!” he shouted.

With renewed determination, Àrà called upon the Baobab.

Her voice rang through the shrine, invoking the forgotten bond that had protected Ayédèrú for centuries. The Baobab answered. Its roots surged upward, breaking through the ground, binding Aríwó in place.

But, the final blow did not belong to Àrà, nor the Baobab. It was the villagers, drawn by Oḍewólé’s rallying call.

Aríwó—an old name, a feared one. The elders’ warning stirred at once: not strength, but remembrance.

So when Oḍewólé’s cry split the air, it did not fall on ignorant ears. The villagers came without hesitation, bearing offerings of fruit and cloth; their voices rising in songs of repentance as they rekindled the sacred rites of their ancestors.

Aríwó screamed as the renewed faith of the people sealed its fate once more, dragging it beneath the Baobab, where it would remain trapped for eternity.

As Aríwó vanished, the Baobab’s leaves regained their vibrant green, pulsing with renewed life.

The calamity faded; the livestock returned; the crops flourished; and the children slept peacefully once more.

Ayédèrú was whole again.

Àrà, once an untouchable force, humbled herself, realizing that even the All-Seeing and All-Knowing had limits; that true strength lay in community and heritage.

The villagers, wiser now, never again took the Baobab’s presence for granted.

Oḍewólé became the storyteller, ensuring that Ayédèrú’s tale and Àrà’s journey lived on through generations.

As the story ended, Àrà perched in the Baobab’s branches, her golden eyes reflecting the setting sun. She was at peace.

But, always vigilant.

Ready to protect Ayédèrú forever.

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