

## Excerpt from Book One of *Gods Among Gazelles*

### “The First Baobob Tree” (an African creation myth)

#### 1

The fashioning of the earth did not take seven days, as some would have it, no, in fact, there is still much fashioning left to be done, and the earth was not created by a single god, as others would have it, it is the work of many gods from many places, but in those early days, the amount of work that lay ahead was almost unimaginable, so much so that the few gods who wandered the shapeless earth in search of a quiet shady tree and a piece of fruit to still the rumble in their bellies could scarcely contemplate the vast empty distances and the endless, vacant sky, and since it was very difficult to work on an empty stomach, even for the gods, little progress had been made, but one day a young god set out in search of the tree of life so that he might share the fruit of that tree with the shapeless world, and because he was a few hours younger than the morning sun, he did not understand the difficulty of the giant task he had set for himself, for the tree of life did not yet exist, but so great was his enthusiasm, the older gods could say nothing against it, or perhaps they simply did not wish to dampen the young god's fiery faith, for they had been young once themselves and had felt the sounds of hope stirring inside their godly breasts and then, later, they felt the heavy, damp earth smell of sadness because nothing had been achieved, and so the oldest of the gods cut off the clay of his ear and gave it a shape that would hold water, and then each god squeezed a tear or two, the remnants of their once happy dreams, into the newly made jug so that the young god might have something to drink along the way, and then the young god set out singing songs of new beginnings and songs of summer thunderstorms and songs of fruit trees and songs of the rolling sea and songs of the early evening sky and songs of the hips of women swiveling with the wetness of desire, and many, many more besides, everything the young god could imagine.

How long he walked, no one knows. Walking and singing. Walking and singing. He walked across the savannahs for days and days and days, endless days, or so it seemed, and he crossed rivers and went into the mountains and then across the high plateaus and through jungles and then into deserts, but it was all the same, for as you will remember, there was much work left to be done in the fashioning of the world, so wherever the young god walked, there was no difference anywhere, the mountains were just as flat as the savannahs and the savannahs were just as tall as the high plateaus, the deserts just as wet as the rivers and the rivers just as leafy and green as the jungles, it was all the same, everywhere he went. It felt like walking a straight line through an empty, silent circle.

Now all this walking and singing was, as you might imagine, thirsty work, but for the longest time the young god had simply forgotten about the jug and the water of tears, so great and burning was his fiery faith, but then the burning of his thirst became just as great, and so he sat down at the top of the flattest, driest mountain he had yet encountered and pulled out the jug, only the jug was gone, and in its place was a strange yellow, velvety gourd, and the young god sniffed the gourd, and it seemed a fruit of some kind, and so he broke it open, exposing the yellowish, whitish flesh of the fruit and also the seeds, and he bit into the fruit and his mouth filled with a tangy, gritty, stringy sweetness, and the young god was amazed, and he looked upon the jug that had become a fruit and he wondered at the

transformation, and so he took another bite, and then another, and then he realized that this fruit before him was the fruit of the tree of life, the very fruit he had wished to share with the shapeless world, and so he took a handful of the seeds and pushed them deep into the ground, and almost immediately the ground began to swell, and the flattest and driest mountain he had encountered became the tallest and the wettest, and from his perch now at the top of the world he could see the joy of other mountains rising up out of the savannahs below, and also he could smell the rising heat of the steamy, leafy jungles and also the forests, and he could almost taste with his eyes the deep, sweet, cooling wet of the winding, snaky rivers, and so forth, and so on, it was as if everything he had imagined and sung about and even thought about during the long, blank days of his wandering had suddenly and fiercely burst into being, but it was more than that, it was the collective imagination of the world that had sprung into existence, as if his thoughts and words and songs had mingled with the tears of the older gods and their thoughts and words and songs and it was this mingling that had brought about the change he was now witnessing, and so it seemed that the jug that had become a fruit now contained the seeds of all creation, every living thing, every creature, every man, woman, child, every god, every thought, idea, song, story, all of it, everything that could possibly be imagined was contained within this fruit, and then with a tremendous, heaving, bellow, the earth at the top of the tallest and wettest mountain he had yet encountered split open and up sprung the tree of life, fully formed, a large greyish-green bulbous trunk that looked like many trunks wrapped around each other, thirty feet from one side to the other, and branches spreading out against the boiling, naked heat of the sun, a thousand feet up in the air, and from the branches white with blossoms there also hung thousands and thousands of the tangy, yellow gourds, and in this way, the very first Baobab tree came into existence, the tree of life, and the making of the world had finally begun.

## 2

When the young god returned from his journey he brought with him a bundle of the yellow, velvety Baobab fruit and a sack of seeds to plant more Baobab trees. But the older gods did not notice him at first, for they were too busy breathing deeply the change that had come over the world, tasting the heart of the leafy jungles and the sun-speckled leopards that slept on the branches, for they had once imagined such jungles, wading knee deep into the hot, wet, steamy rivers and the sucking, surging, dampening river mud and pushing past hippopotami and water pythons and the great Marabou storks taking to the air in a flurry of wings, and also the flamingos, and they felt the bellowing of elephants a low rumble in the distance, like thunder echoing in the distant mountains, like waves crashing upon a rocky shoreline, like lions moaning their love songs in the early, dew-spattered, morning dark, all of it they were breathing in, tasting the depth of new life with their eyes, feeling the sounds of the deserts and the savannahs, the hissing prick of heat burning into the sky, the sky now reaching out and then down to the horizon, a clear blue sheltering hand upon the world, the drumming, ear-numbing echo of gazelles racing towards the safety of the sheltering hand, and also the zebras and the wildebeests and the oryx, and the older gods were amazed at the shapes and the sounds and the tastes and the smells of this new Africa, for even though they had imagined such a world, the reality surrounding them was a different thing, it was broader than their imagination, larger, deeper, rounder, wetter, drier, stringier, steamier, fleshier, as if what they had imagined had only been a murmuring of

what was to come, a sound half heard, a ripple of movement, a flickering of light and shadow. But still, they were pleased with the change, in fact, they were more than pleased. They were consumed with the sacred, triumphant joy of their nearly forgotten and now unleashed sense of purpose. They were at one with themselves.

In time, of course, the older gods had sampled all there was of the new world, and it was only then that they breathed in the return of the younger god. Immediately they tasted the memory of everything that had happened from the gourd becoming the Baobab fruit to the explosion of the first tree to the world taking shape, and they also understood that the young god was the cause of all of it, and thus also the cause of their own rediscovered joy and belief in themselves, and so they welcomed him with warm, grateful, eager embraces, for what else could they do, and they called him The-One-Who-Bends-the-World, for what else could they now call him, and they helped him with the bundle of Baobab fruit and the sack of seeds, for they could see that the young god was weary from his journey. Then the young god offered them each a piece of the sweet, tangy, stringy fruit to try for themselves and he went to sleep.

The older gods devoured the pieces of fruit with wordless hunger, for they had not eaten for a very long time, and then quite without pausing they started in on the rest of the fruit and also the sack of seeds, and before the moon had set, there was nothing left, not even a drop of juice, but there was no remorse among them, no sense of shame, the young god sleeping peacefully beneath the fronds of a large fern and the older gods sitting in the grass in a small clearing not too far away, glancing occasionally at the young god but mostly looking at each other, the bright, warm white of the festering moon washing down across their faces now twisted with frustration and anxiety and envy, for in the eating of the fruit their minds had exploded into the nighttime sky and become a single devouring mind, and so they became envious of the young god and his Baobab fruit, and envious also of the name they had bestowed upon him, for they were a great deal older and had been trying to bend the world with little success for millennia, and they began to quarrel among themselves about the young god and how he lacked the maturity and wisdom to truly appreciate the changes that had taken place, perhaps he wasn't responsible for those changes anyway, it seemed unlikely, his being so young, perhaps it was one of them who was the first cause, they had all been there longer, perhaps they had finally achieved after years and years and years what they had always hoped for, what they had cried for, and then they were certain this was the case, and so they decided they should take the name back and give it to one who was not so young.

The-One-Who-Bends-the-World is a name of great distinction and unending responsibility, they cried, and should only be given to a god who is older than the sun, one of us sitting here, and so they began to debate who among them should take the young god's name for his own.

"Without the clay of my ear," said the oldest of the gods, "there would have been no jug and thus no gourd and the world would still be flat and shapeless."

"We all had ears to give," said another. "It was not your ear that was the cause, it was our tears."

"Yes," said a third, "but we all shed tears."

"Ah, yes, that is so," said the oldest. "But who among you shed more tears than I?"

And round and round they went arguing over who had provided the most tears and then whose tears were of the highest quality and then whose tears were the product of the greatest sadness, and so on, and so forth, until there was nothing more to say, for this was

not an issue that could be settled by argument, and so the older gods grew silent, bitter, burning with resentment, sitting there in the dark, for the moon had now set, their bright, orange-glowing eyes burning holes in the nighttime sky of the young god's imagination, the night birds of Africa calling out now and then, their cries reverberating against the sullen, oppressive, murderous darkness of the older gods, and then silence.

Then the oldest god spoke. "We have been going about this the wrong way," he said. "We are all gods ourselves. And we have now eaten the fruit of the tree of life and also the seeds. We should settle this matter as would gods who possess the power of creation. We should each go off into a separate corner of the world and reshape that corner according to our own inclinations and abilities. Then we will surely know who is the first cause and who is not. Then we will surely know who should be called The-One-Who-Bends-the-World. And then, and only then, will we deal with this young god who has usurped our birthright!" And so the older gods disappeared into the new light of the new day, the greenish jungle light filtering through the branches, the leaves, settling on the grassy ground like dew, but the older gods were now gone, each heading to a lonely, forgotten corner of the world to try his own powers of creation, desperate to achieve the miracle of the Baobab tree and then return to claim dominion over the world, and also dominion over the young god, and perhaps the others as well.