

**SNEAK  
PEEK!**  
Chapters 1 to 6

TOMI ADEYEMI

CHILDREN  
OF  
BLOOD  
AND  
BONE



# CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE

---

Tomi Adeyemi

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK



macmillan  
children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"



Henry Holt and Company, *Publishers since 1866*  
Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

fiercereads.com

Copyright © 2018 by Tomi Adeyemi

All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-17097-2

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at Macmil-

lanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First edition, 2018 / Designed by TK

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



macmillan  
children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"

*To Mom and Dad—  
who sacrificed everything to give me this chance  
&  
To Jackson—  
who believed in me and this story long before I did*



macmillan  
children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"



## **THE MAJI CLANS**

IKU CLAN: MAJI OF LIFE AND DEATH

Maji Title: Reaper

Deity: Oya

---

ÉMI CLAN: MAJI OF MIND, SPIRIT, AND DREAMS

Maji Title: Connector

Deity: Ori

---

OMI CLAN: MAJI OF WATER

Maji Title: Tider

Deity: Yemója

---

INÁ CLAN: MAJI OF FIRE

Maji Title: Burner

Deity: Sangó

---

AFÊFÊ CLAN: MAJI OF AIR



macmillan  
children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"

Maji Title: Winder

Deity: Ayao

---

AIYE CLAN: MAJI OF IRON AND EARTH

*Maji Title:* Grounder + Welder

*Deity:* Ogún

---

INA CLAN: MAJI OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Maji Title: Lighter

Deity: Ochumare

---

IWOSAN CLAN: MAJI OF HEALTH AND DISEASE

*Maji Title:* Healer + Cancer

*Deity:* Babalúaye

---

ARÍRAN CLAN: MAJI OF TIME

Maji Title: Seer

Deity: Orunmila

---

ERANKO CLAN: MAJI OF ANIMALS



macmillan  
children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"



Maji Title: Tamer  
Deity: Oxosi



macmillan

children's publishing group  
"For Review Purposes Only"

I try not to think of her.

But when I do, I think of rice.

When Mama was around, the hut always smelled of jollof rice.

I think about the way her dark skin glowed like the summer sun, the way her smile made Baba come alive. The way her white hair fuzzed and coiled, an untamed crown that breathed and thrived.

I hear the myths she would tell me at night. Tzain's laughter when they played agbön in the park.

Baba's cries as the soldiers wrapped a chain around her neck. Her screams as they dragged her into the dark.

The incantations that spewed from her mouth like lava. The magic of death that led her astray.

I think about the way her corpse hung from that tree.

I think about the king who took her away.







## CHAPTER ONE

Zélie

*Pick me.*

It's all I can do not to scream. I dig my nails into the marula oak of my staff and squeeze to keep from fidgeting. Beads of sweat drip down my back, but I can't tell if it's from the morning heat or from my heart slamming against my chest. Moon after moon I've been passed over.

Today can't be the same.

I tuck a lock of snow-white hair behind my ear and do my best to sit still. As always, Mama Agba makes the selection grueling, staring at each girl just long enough to make us squirm.

Her brows knit in concentration, deepening the creases in her shaved head. With her dark brown skin and muted kaftan, Mama Agba looks like any other elder in the village. You would never guess a woman her age could be so lethal.

"Ahem." Yemi clears her throat at the front of the ahéré, a not-so-subtle reminder that she's already passed this test. She smirks at us as she twirls her hand-carved staff, eager to see which one of us she gets to defeat in our graduation match. Most girls cower at the prospect of facing Yemi, but today I crave it. I've been practicing and I'm ready.

I know I can win.

"Zélie."

Mama Agba's weathered voice breaks through the silence. A



collective exhale echoes from the fifteen other girls who weren't chosen. The name bounces around the woven walls of the reed ahéré until I realize Mama Agba's called me.

"Really?"

Mama Agba smacks her lips. "I can choose someone else—"

"No!" I scramble to my feet and bow quickly. "Thank you, Mama. I'm ready."

The sea of brown faces parts as I move through the crowd. With each step, I focus on the way my bare feet drag against the woven reeds of Mama Agba's floor, testing the friction I'll need to win this match and finally graduate.

When I reach the black mat that marks the arena, Yemi is the first to bow. She waits for me to do the same, but her gaze only stokes the fire in my core. There's no respect in her stance, no promise of a proper fight. She thinks because I'm a diviner, I'm beneath her.

She thinks I'm going to lose.

"Bow, Zélie." Though the warning is evident in Mama Agba's voice, I can't bring myself to move. This close to Yemi, the only thing I see is her luscious black hair, her coconut-brown skin, so much lighter than my own. Her complexion carries the soft brown of Orishans who've never spent a day laboring in the sun. A privileged life funded by hush coin from a father she never met, a noble who banished his bastard daughter to our village in shame.

I push my shoulders back and thrust my chest forward, straightening though I need to bend. Yemi's features stand out in the crowd of diviners adorned with snow-white hair. Ones who've been forced to bow to those who look like her time and time again.

“Zélie, do not make me repeat myself.”

“But Mama—”

“Bow or leave the ring! You’re wasting everyone’s time.”

With no other choice, I clench my jaw and bow, making Yemi’s insufferable smirk blossom. “Was that so hard?” Yemi bows again for good measure. “If you’re going to lose, do it with pride.”

Muffled giggles break out among the girls, quickly silenced by a sharp wave of Mama Agba’s hand. I shoot them a glare before focusing on my opponent.

*We’ll see who’s giggling when I win.*

“Take position.”

We back up to the edge of the mat and kick our staffs up from the ground. Yemi’s sneer disappears as her eyes narrow; her killer instinct emerges.

We stare each other down, waiting for the signal to begin. I worry Mama Agba’ll drag this out forever when at last she shouts.

“Commence!”

And instantly I’m on the defensive.

Before I can even think of striking, Yemi whips around with the speed of a cheetanaire. Her staff swings over her head one moment and at my neck the next. Though the girls behind me gasp, I don’t miss a beat.

Yemi may be fast, but I can be faster.

When her staff nears, I arch as far as my back will bend, dodging her attack. I’m still arched when Yemi strikes again, this time slamming her weapon down with the force of a girl twice her size.

I throw myself to the side, rolling across the mat as her staff

smacks against its reeds. Yemi rears back to strike again as I struggle to find my footing.

“Zélie,” Mama Agba warns, but I don’t need her help. In one smooth motion, I roll to my feet and thrust my shaft upward, blocking Yemi’s next blow.

Our staffs collide with a loud crack. The reed walls shudder. My weapon is still reverberating from the blow when Yemi pivots to strike at my knees.

I push off my front leg and swing my arms for momentum, cartwheeling in midair. As I flip over her outstretched staff, I see my first opening—my chance to be on the offensive.

“Huh!” I grunt, using the momentum of the aerial to land a strike of my own. *Come on—*

Yemi’s staff smacks against mine, stopping my attack before it even starts.

“Patience, Zélie,” Mama Agba calls out. “It is not your time to attack. Observe, react—wait for your opponent to strike.”

I stifle my groan but nod, stepping back with my staff. *You’ll have your chance, I coach myself. Just wait your tur—*

“That’s right, Zél.” Yemi’s voice dips, so low only I can hear it. “Listen to Mama Agba. Be a good little maggot.”

And there it is.

That word.

That miserable, degrading slur.

Whispered with no regard. Wrapped in that insufferable smirk.

Before I can stop myself, I thrust my staff forward, only a hair from Yemi’s gut. I’ll take one of Mama Agba’s infamous beatings for this later, but the fear in Yemi’s eyes is more than worth it.

“Hey!” Though Yemi turns to Mama Agba to intervene, she

doesn't have time to complain. I twirl my staff with a speed that makes her eyes widen before launching into another attack.

"This isn't the exercise!" Yemi shrieks, jumping to evade my strike at her knees. "Mama—"

"Must she fight your battles for you?" I laugh. "Come on, Yem. If you're going to lose, do it with *pride!*"

Rage flashes in Yemi's eyes like a bull-horned lionaire ready to pounce. She clenches her staff with a vengeance.

Now the real fight begins.

The walls of Mama Agba's ahéré hum as our staffs smack again and again. We trade blow for blow in search of an opening, a chance to land that crucial strike. I see an opportunity when—

"Ugh!"

I stumble back and hunch over, wheezing as nausea climbs up my throat. For a moment I worry she's crushed my ribs, but the ache in my abdomen quells that fear.

"Halt—"

"No!" I interrupt Mama Agba, voice hoarse. I force air into my lungs and use my staff to stand up straight. "I'm okay."

I'm not done yet.

"Zélie—" Mama starts, but Yemi doesn't wait for her to finish. She speeds toward me hot with fury, her staff only a finger's breadth from my head. As she rears back to attack, I spin out of her range. Before she can pivot, I whip around, ramming my staff into her sternum.

"Ah!" Yemi gasps. Her face contorts in pain and shock as she reels backward from my blow. No one's ever struck her in one of Mama Agba's battles. She doesn't know how it feels.

Before she can recover, I spin and thrust my staff into her

stomach. I'm about to deliver the final blow when the russet sheets covering the ahéré's entrance fly open.

Bisi stands in the doorway, her small chest heaving up and down.

"What is it?" Mama asks.

Tears gather in Bisi's eyes. "I'm sorry," she whimpers, "I fell asleep, I—I wasn't—"

"Spit it out, child!"

"They're coming!" Bisi finally exclaims. "They're close, they're almost here!"

For a moment I can't breathe. I don't think anyone can. Fear paralyzes every inch of our beings.

Then the will to survive takes over.

"Quickly," Mama Agba hisses. "We don't have much time!"

I pull Yemi to her feet. She's still wheezing, but there's no time to make sure she's okay. I grab her staff and rush to collect the others.

The ahéré erupts in a blur of chaos as everyone races to hide the truth. Yards of bright fabric fly through the air while an army of reed mannequins rises. With so much happening at once, there's no way of knowing whether we'll hide everything in time. All I can do is focus on my task: shoving each staff under the arena mat, where they can't be seen.

As I finish, Yemi thrusts a wooden needle into my hands. I'm still running to my designated station when the sheets covering the ahéré entrance fly open again.

"Zélie!" Mama Agba barks.

I freeze. Every eye in the ahéré turns to me. Before I can speak, Mama Agba slaps the back of my head; a sting only she can summon tears down my spine.

"Stay at your station," she hisses. "You need all the practice



you can get.”

“Mama Agba, I . . .”

She leans in as my pulse races, eyes glimmering with the truth.

*A distraction . . .*

A way to buy us time.

“I’m sorry, Mama Agba. Forgive me.”

“Just get back to your station.”

I bite back a smile and bow my head in apology, sweeping low enough to survey the guards who entered. Like most soldiers in Orisha, the shorter of the two has a complexion that matches Yemi’s: brown like worn leather, framed with thick black hair. Though we’re only young girls, he keeps his hand on the pommel of his sword. His grip tightens, as if at any moment one of us could strike.

The other man stands tall, solemn and serious, unusually dark for a guard. I have to wonder if diviner blood runs through his lineage, a secret shame he wears on his skin.

Both men wear the royal seal of King Saran, stark on their iron breastplates. Just a glance at the ornate snow leopard makes my stomach clench, a harsh reminder of the monarch who sent them.

I make a show of sulking back to my reed mannequin, legs nearly collapsing in relief. What once resembled an arena now plays the convincing part of a seamstress’s shop. Bright tribal fabric adorns the mannequins in front of each girl, cut and pinned in Mama Agba’s signature patterns. We stitch the hems of the same dashikis we’ve been stitching for years, sewing in silence as we wait for the guards to go away.

Mama Agba travels up and down the rows of girls, inspecting

the work of her apprentices. Despite my nerves, I grin as she makes the guards wait, refusing to acknowledge their unwelcome presence.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she finally asks.

“Tax time,” the darker guard grunts. “Pay up.”

Mama Agba’s face drops like the heat at night. “I paid my taxes last week.”

“This isn’t a trade tax.” The other guard’s gaze combs over all the diviners with long white hair. “Maggot rates went up. Since you got so many, so have yours.”

*Of course.* I grit my teeth. I fight the urge to scream. It’s not enough for the king to keep the diviners down. He has to break anyone who tries to help us.

My jaw clenches as I try to block out the guard, to block out the way *maggot* stung from his lips. It doesn’t matter that we’ll never become the maji we were meant to be. In their eyes we’re still maggots.

That’s all they’ll ever see.

Mama Agba presses her lips in a tight line. There’s no way she has the coin to spare. “You already raised the diviner tax last moon,” she argues. “And the moon before that.”

The lighter guard steps forward, reaching for his sword, ready to strike at the first sign of defiance. “Maybe you shouldn’t keep company with maggots.”

“Maybe you should stop robbing us.”

The words spill out of me before I can stop them. The room holds its breath. I grip the fabric on my mannequin so hard my fists ache. Mama Agba goes rigid, dark eyes begging me to be quiet.

“Diviners aren’t making more coin. Where do you expect these new taxes to come from?” I ask. “You can’t just raise the

rates again and again. If you keep raising them, we can't pay!"

The guard saunters over in a way that makes me itch for my staff. With the right blow I could knock him off his feet; with the right thrust I could crush his throat.

For the first time I realize that the guard doesn't wield an ordinary sword. His black blade gleams in his sheath, a metal more precious than gold.

*Majacite . . .*

A weaponized alloy forged before the Raid, created to weaken our magic and burn through our flesh.

Just like the black chain they wrapped around Mama's neck.

A powerful maji could fight through its influence, but the rare metal is debilitating for most of us. Though I have no magic to suppress, the proximity of the majacite blade still pricks at my skin as the guard boxes me in.

"You would do well to keep your mouth shut, little girl."

And he's right. I should. Keep my mouth shut, swallow my rage. Live to see another day.

But when he's this close to my face, it's all I can do not to jam my sewing needle into his beady brown eye. Maybe I should be quiet.

Or maybe he should die.

"You sh—"

Mama Agba shoves me aside with so much force I tumble to the ground.

"Here," she interrupts with a handful of coins. "Just take it."

"Mama, don't—"

She whips around with a glare that turns my body to stone. I shut my mouth and crawl to my feet, shrinking into the patterned cloth of my mannequin.

Coins jingle as the guard counts the bronze pieces placed

into his palm. He lets out a grunt when he finishes. “It’s not enough.”

“It has to be,” Mama Agba says, desperation breaking into her voice. “This is it. This is everything I have.”

Hatred simmers beneath my skin, prickling sharp and hot. This isn’t right. Mama Agba shouldn’t have to beg. I lift my gaze and catch the guard’s eye. A mistake. Before I can turn away or mask my disgust, he grabs me by the hair.

“Ah!” I cry out as pain lances through my skull. In an instant the guard slams me to the ground facedown, knocking the breath from my throat.

“You may not have any money.” The guard digs into my back with his knee, making it even harder for me to breathe. “But you sure have your fair share of maggots.” He grips my thigh with a rough hand. “I’ll start with this one.”

My skin grows hot and I close my eyes, clenching my hands to hide the trembling. I want to scream, to break every bone in his body, but with each second I wither. His touch erases everything I am, everything I’ve fought so hard to become.

In this moment I’m that little girl again, helpless as the soldier drags my mother away.

“That’s enough.” Mama Agba pushes the guard back and pulls me to her chest, snarling like a bull-horned lionaire protecting her cub. “You have my coin and that’s all you’re getting. Leave. Now.”

The guard’s anger boils at her audacity. He moves to unsheathe his sword, but the other guard holds him back.

“Come on. We’ve got to cover the village by dusk.”

Though the darker guard keeps his voice light, his jaw sets in a tight line. Maybe in our faces he sees a mother or sister, a re-

minder of someone he'd want to protect.

The other soldier is still for a moment, so still I don't know what he'll do. Eventually he unhands his sword, cutting instead with his glare. "Teach these maggots to stay in line," he warns Mama Agba. "Or I will."

His gaze shifts to me; though my body drips with sweat, my insides freeze. The guard runs his eyes up and down my frame, a warning of what he can take.

*Try it*, I want to snap, but my mouth is too dry to speak. We stand in silence until the guards exit and the stomping of their metal-soled boots fades away.

Mama Agba's strength disappears like a candle blown out by the wind. She grabs on to a mannequin for support, the lethal warrior I know diminishing into a frail, old stranger.

"Mama . . ."

I move to help her, but she slaps my hand away. "*Ode!*"

*Fool*, she scolds me in Yoruba, the maji tongue outlawed after the Raid. I haven't heard our language in so long, it takes me a few moments to remember what the word even means.

"What in the gods' names is wrong with you?"

Once again, every eye in the ahéré is on me. Even little Bisi stares me down. But how can Mama Agba yell at me? How is this my fault when those crooked guards started it?

"I was trying to protect you."

"Protect me?" Mama Agba says. "You knew your lip wouldn't change a damn thing. You could've gotten all of us killed!"

I stumble, taken aback by the harshness of her words. She's never yelled at me like this. I've never seen such disappointment in her eyes.

"If I can't fight them, why are we here?" My voice cracks, but

I choke down my tears. “What’s the point of training if we can’t protect ourselves? Why do this if we can’t protect you?”

“For gods’ sakes, *think*, Zélie. Think about someone other than yourself! Who would protect your father if you hurt those men? Who would keep Tzain safe when the guards come for blood?”

I open my mouth to retort, but there’s nothing I can say. She’s right. Even if I took down a few guards, I couldn’t take on the whole army. Sooner or later they would find me.

Sooner or later they would break the people I love.

“Mama Agba?” Bisi’s voice shrinks, small like a mouse. She clings to Yemi’s draped pants as tears well in her eyes. “Why do they hate us?”

A new weariness settles on Mama’s frame. She opens her arms to Bisi. “They don’t hate you, my child. They hate what you were meant to become.”

Bisi buries herself inside the fabric of Mama’s kaftan, muffling her sobs. As she cries, Mama Agba surveys the room, seeing all the tears the other girls hold back.

“Zélie asked why we are here. It’s a valid question. We often talk of *how* you must fight, but we never talk about why.” Mama sets Bisi down and motions for Yemi to bring her a stool. “You girls have to remember that the world wasn’t always like this. There was a time when you didn’t have to fight.”

As Mama Agba settles herself onto the chair, the girls gather around, eager to listen. Each day, Mama’s lessons end with a tale or fable, a teaching from another time. Normally I would push myself to the front to savor each word. Today I stay on the outskirts, too ashamed to get near.

Mama Agba rubs her hands together, slow and methodical.



Despite everything that's happened, a thin smile hangs on her lips, a smile only one tale can summon. Unable to resist, I step in closer, pushing past a few girls. This is our story. Our history.

A truth the king tried to bury with our dead.

"In the beginning, Orisha was a land where the rare and sacred maji thrived. Each of the ten clans was gifted by the gods above and given a different power over the land. There were maji who could control water, others who commanded fire. There were maji with the power to read minds, maji who could even peer through time!"

Though we've all heard this story at one point or another—from Mama Agba, from parents we no longer have—hearing it again doesn't take the wonder away from the words. Our eyes light up as Mama Agba describes maji with the gift of healing and the ability to cause disease. We lean in when she speaks of maji who tamed the wild beasts of the land, of maji who wielded light and darkness in the palms of their hands.

"Each maji was born with white hair, the sign of the gods' touch. They used their gifts to care for the people of Orisha and were revered throughout the lands. But not everyone was gifted by the gods." Mama Agba gestures around the room. "Because of this, every time new maji were born, entire provinces rejoiced, celebrating at the first sight of their white coils. The chosen children couldn't do magic before they turned thirteen, so until their powers manifested, they were called the *ibawi*, 'the divine.'"

Bisi lifts her chin and smiles, remembering the origin of our diviner title. Mama Agba reaches down and tugs on a strand of her white hair, a marker we've all been taught to hide.

"The maji rose throughout Orisha, becoming the first kings

and queens. In that time everyone knew peace, but that peace didn't last. Those in power began to abuse their magic, and as punishment, the gods stripped them of their gifts. When the magic leached from their blood, their white hair disappeared as a sign of their sin. In time, love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away."

The room dims in the echo of Mama Agba's words. We all know what comes next; the night we never speak of, the night we will never be able to forget.

"Until that night the maji were able to survive because they used their powers to defend themselves. But eleven years ago, magic disappeared. Only the gods know why." Mama Agba shuts her eyes and releases a heavy sigh. "One day magic *breathed*. The next, it died."

*Only the gods know why?*

Out of respect for Mama Agba, I bite back my words. She speaks the way all adults who lived through the Raid talk. Resigned, like the gods took magic to punish us, or they simply had a change of heart.

Deep down, I know the truth. I knew it the moment I saw Mama in chains, hanging with the maji of Ibadan from that lifeless tree. The gods died with our magic.

They're never coming back.

"On that fateful day, King Saran didn't hesitate," Mama Agba continues. "He used the maji's moment of weakness to strike."

I close my eyes, fighting back the tears that want to fall. The chain they jerked around Mama's neck. The blood dripping to the ground.

The silent memories of that night fill the reed hut, drenching

the air with grief.

All of us lost the maji members of our families that night.

Mama Agba sighs and stands up, gathering the strength we all know. She looks over every girl in the room like a general inspecting her troops.

“I teach the way of the staff to any girl who wants to learn, because in this world there will always be men who wish you harm. But I started this training for the diviners, for all the children of the fallen maji. Though your ability to become maji has disappeared, the hatred and violence toward you remains. That is why we are here. That is why we train.”

With a sharp flick, Mama removes her own compacted staff and smacks it against the floor. “Your opponents carry swords. Why do I train you in the art of the staff?”

Our voices echo the mantra Mama Agba has made us repeat time and time again. “It avoids rather than hurts, it hurts rather than maims, it maims rather than kills—the staff does not destroy.”

“I teach you to be warriors in the garden so you will never be gardeners in the war. I give you the strength to fight, but you all must learn the strength of restraint.” Mama turns to me, shoulders pinned back. “You must protect those who can’t defend themselves. That is the way of the staff.”

The girls nod, but all I can do is stare at the floor. Once again, I’ve almost ruined everything. Once again, I’ve let people down.

“All right,” Mama Agba sighs. “That’s enough for today. Gather your things. We’ll pick up where we left off tomorrow.”

The girls file out of the hut, grateful to escape. I try to do the same, but Mama Agba’s wrinkled hand grips my shoulder.

“Mama—”

“Silence,” she orders. The last of the girls give me sympathetic looks. They rub their behinds, probably calculating how many lashes my own is about to get.

*Twenty for ignoring the exercise . . . fifty for speaking out of turn . . . a hundred for almost getting us killed . . .*

No. A hundred would be far too generous.

I stifle a sigh and brace myself for the sting. *It'll be quick, I coach myself. It'll be over before it—*

“Sit, Zélie.”

Mama Agba hands me a cup of tea and pours one for herself. The sweet scent wafts into my nose as the cup's warmth heats my hands.

I scrunch my eyebrows. “Did you poison this?”

The corners of Mama Agba's lips twitch, but she hides her amusement behind a stern face. I hide my own with a sip of the tea, savoring the splash of honey on my tongue. I turn the cup in my hands, fingering the lavender beads embedded in its rim. Mama had a cup like this—its beads were maroon and white, decorated in honor of Oya, the goddess of life and death.

For a moment the memory distracts me from Mama Agba's disappointment, but as the tea's flavor fades, the sour taste of guilt seeps back in. She shouldn't have to go through this. Not for me.

“I'm sorry.” I pick at the beads along the cup to avoid looking up. “I know . . . I know I don't make things easy for you.”

Like Yemi, Mama Agba is a kosidán, an Orïshan who doesn't have the potential to do magic. Before the Raid we believed the gods chose who was born a diviner and who wasn't, but now that magic's gone, I don't understand why the distinction matters.

Free of the white hair of diviners, Mama Agba could blend in with the other Orishans, avoid the guards' torture. If she didn't associate with us, the guards might not bother her at all. Part of me wishes she would abandon us, spare herself the pain. With her tailoring skills, she could probably become a merchant, get her fair share of coin instead of having them all ripped away.

"You're starting to look more like her, did you know that?" Mama Agba takes a small sip of her tea and smiles. "The resemblance is frightening when you yell. You inherited her rage."

My mouth falls open; Mama Agba doesn't like to talk of those we've lost.

Few of us do.

I hide my surprise with another taste of tea and nod. "I know."

I don't remember when it happened, but the shift in Baba was undeniable. He stopped meeting my eyes, unable to look at me without seeing the face of his murdered wife.

"That's good." Mama Agba's smile falters into a frown. "You were just a child during the Raid. I worried you'd forget."

"I couldn't if I tried." Not when Mama had a face like the sun. It's that face I try to remember.

Not the corpse with blood trickling down her neck.

"I know you fight for her." Mama Agba runs her hand through my white hair. "But the King is ruthless, Zélie. He would sooner have the entire kingdom slaughtered than tolerate diviner dissent. When your opponent has no honor, you must fight in different ways, smarter ways."

"Does one of those ways include smacking those bastards with my staff?"

Mama Agba chuckles, skin crinkling around her mahogany

eyes. “Just promise me you’ll be careful. Promise you’ll choose the right moment to fight.”

I grab Mama Agba’s hands and bow my head, diving deep to show my respect. “I promise, Mama. I won’t let you down again.”

“Good, because I have something and I don’t want to regret showing it to you.”

Mama Agba reaches into her kaftan and pulls out a sleek black rod. She gives it a sharp flick. I jump back as the rod expands into a gleaming metal staff.

“Oh my gods,” I breathe out, fighting the urge to clutch the masterpiece. Ancient symbols coat every meter of the black metal, each carving reminiscent of a lesson Mama Agba once taught. Like a bee to honey, my eyes find the *akofena* first, the crossed blades, the swords of war. *Courage does not always roar*, she said that day. *Valor does not always shine*. My eyes drift to the *akoma* beside the swords next, the heart of patience and tolerance. On that day . . . I’m almost positive I got a beating that day.

Each symbol takes me back to another lesson, another story, another wisdom. I look at Mama, waiting. Is this a gift or what she’ll use to beat me?

“Here.” She places the smooth metal in my hand. Immediately, I sense its power. Iron-lined . . . weighted to crack skulls.

“Is this really happening?”

Mama nods. “You fought like a warrior today. You deserve to graduate.”

I rise to twirl the staff and marvel at its strength. The metal cuts through the air like a knife, more lethal than any oak staff I’ve ever carved.

“Do you remember what I told you when we first started train-

ing?”

I nod and mimic Mama Agba’s tired voice. “If you’re going to pick fights with the guards, you better learn how to win.”

Though she slaps me over the head, her hearty laughter echoes against the reed walls. I hand her the staff and she rams it into the ground; the weapon collapses back into a metal rod.

“You know how to win,” she says. “Just make sure you know when to fight.”

Pride and honor and pain swirl in my chest when Mama Agba places the staff back into my palm. Not trusting myself to speak, I wrap my hands around her waist and inhale the familiar smell of freshly washed fabric and sweet tea.

Though Mama Agba stiffens at first, she holds me tight, squeezing away the pain. She pulls back to say more, but stops as the sheets of the ahéré fly open again.

I grab the metal rod, prepared to flick until I recognize my older brother, Tzain, standing in the doorway. The reed hut instantly shrinks in his massive presence, all muscle and strain. Tendons bulge against his dark skin. Sweat rains from his black hair down his forehead. His eyes catch mine and a sharp pressure clamps my heart.

“It’s Baba.”





## CHAPTER TWO

Zélie

The last words I ever wanted to hear.

*It's Baba* means it's over.

*It's Baba* means he's hurt, or worse—

No. I stop my thoughts as we sprint across the wooden planks of the merchant quarter. *He's okay*, I promise myself. *Whatever it is, he's going to live.*

Eloirin rises with the sun, bringing our ocean village to life. Waves crash against the wooden pillars that keep our settlement afloat, coating our feet with mist. Like a spider caught in the web of the sea, our village sits on eight legs of lumber all connected in the center. It's that center we run to now. That center that brings us closer to Baba.

"Watch it," a kosidán woman yells as I sprint past, almost knocking a basket of plantain off her black hair. Maybe if she realized my world is falling apart, she'd find the heart to forgive.

"What happened?" I pant.

"I don't know," Tzain rushes out. "Ndulu interrupted agbön practice. Said Baba was in trouble. I was headed home, but Yemi told me you had a problem with the guards?"

*Oh gods, what if it's the one from Mama Agba's hut?* Fear creeps into my consciousness as we zip through the tradeswomen and craftsmen crowding the wooden walkways. The guard who attacked me could've gone after Baba. And soon he'll go after—

“Zélie!” Tzain shouts with an edge that indicates this isn’t his first attempt to grab my attention. “Why’d you leave him? It was your turn to stay!”

“Today was the graduation match! If I missed it—”

“Dammit, Zél!” Tzain’s roar makes other villagers turn. “Are you serious? You left Baba for your stupid stick?”

“It’s not a stick, it’s a weapon,” I shoot back. “And I didn’t abandon him. Baba overslept. He needed to rest. And I’ve stayed every day this week—”

“Because I stayed every day last week!” Tzain leaps over a crawling child, muscles rippling when he lands. A kosidán girl smiles as he runs past, hoping a flirtatious wave will break his stride. Even now, villagers gravitate to Tzain like magnets finding their way home. I have no need to push others out of my way—one look at my white hair, and people avoid me like I’m an infectious plague.

“The Orishan Games are only two moons away,” Tzain continues. “You know what winning that kind of coin could do for us? When I practice, *you* have to stay with Baba. What part of that’s so hard to understand? Dammit.”

Tzain skids to a stop before the floating market in the center of Eloirin. Surrounded by a rectangular walkway, the stretch of open sea swells with villagers haggling inside their round, coconut boats. Before the daily trades begin, we can run across the night bridge to our home in the fishermen’s sector. But the market’s opened early and the bridge is nowhere to be seen. We’ll have to go the long way.

Ever the athlete, Tzain takes off, sprinting down the walkway surrounding the market to make it back to Baba. I begin to follow him but pause when I see the coconut boats.



Merchants and fishermen barter, trading fresh fruit for the best of that day's catch. When times are good, the trades are kind—everyone accepts a little less to give others a little more. But today everyone bickers, demanding bronze and silver over promises and fish.

*The taxes . . .*

The wretched face of the guard fills my mind as the ghost of his grip burns my thigh. The memory of his glare propels me. I leap into the first boat.

“Zélie, watch out!” Kana cries out, cradling her precious fruit. Our village gardener adjusts her headwrap and scowls as I hop onto a wooden barge teeming with blue moonfish.

“Sorry!”

I yell apology after apology, leaping from boat to boat like a red-nosed frogger. As soon as I land on the deck of the fishermen's sector, I'm off, relishing in the sensation of my feet pounding against the wooden planks. Though Tzain now trails behind, I keep going. I need to reach Baba first. If it's bad, Tzain'll need a warning.

*If Baba's dead . . .*

The thought turns my legs to lead. He can't be dead. It's half past dawn; we need to load our boat and sail out to sea. By the time we lay out our nets, the prime catch will have passed. Who'll scold me for that if Baba's gone?

I picture him before I left, passed out in the emptiness of our ahéré. Even asleep, he looked worn, like the longest sleep couldn't grant him rest. I had hoped he wouldn't wake until I returned, but I should've known better. In stillness, he has to deal with his pain, his regrets . . .

And me.

Me and my stupid mistakes.

The crowd gathered outside my ahéré makes me stumble to a halt. People block my view of the ocean, pointing and shouting at something I can't see. Before I can push my way in, Tzain barrels through the crowd. As a path clears, my heart stops.

Almost half a kilometer out at sea, a man flails, his dark hands thrashing in desperation. Powerful waves ram against the poor soul's head, drowning him with each impact. The man cries out for help, voice choked and weak. But it's a voice I'd know anywhere.

The voice of my father.

Two fishermen row toward him, frantic as they paddle in their coconut boats. But the force of the waves pushes them back. They'll never reach him in time.

"No," I cry in horror as a current pulls Baba below the surface. Though I wait for him to surface, nothing breaks through the vengeful waves. We're too late.

Baba's gone.

It hits me like a staff to the chest. To the head. To the heart.

In an instant the air vanishes from my world and I forget how to breathe.

But while I struggle to stand, Tzain launches into action. I scream as he dives into the water, cutting through the waves with the power of a dual-finned shark.

Tzain swims with a frenzy I've never seen. Within moments he overtakes the boats. Seconds later he reaches the area where Baba went under.

He dives down and my chest tightens so much I swear I feel my ribs crack. But when Tzain reemerges, his hands are empty. No body.

No Baba.

Panting, Tzain dives again, kicking harder this time. The seconds without him stretch into an eternity. *Oh my gods . . .*

I could lose them both.

“Come on,” I whisper as I stare at the waves where Tzain and Baba have disappeared. “Come *back*.”

I’ve whispered these words before.

As a kid, I once watched Baba haul Tzain from the depths of a lake, ripping him from the seaweed that had trapped him underwater. He pumped on his fragile chest, but when Baba failed to make him breathe, it was Mama and her magic who saved him. She risked everything, violating maji law to call on the forbidden powers in her blood. She wove her incantations into Tzain like a thread, pulling him back to life with the magic of the dead.

I wish Mama was alive every day but never more than this moment. I wish the magic that coursed through her body ran through mine.

I wish I could bring Tzain and Baba back.

“Please.” Despite everything I believe, I close my eyes and pray, just like I did that day. If even one god is alive, I need her to hear me now.

“Please!” Tears leak through my lashes, hope shriveling inside my chest. “Bring them back. Please, Oya, don’t take them too—”

“Ugh!”

My eyes snap open as Tzain bursts out of the ocean, one arm around Baba’s chest. A liter of water seems to escape Baba’s throat as he coughs, but he’s here.

He’s alive.

I fall to my knees, nearly collapsing on the wooden walkway.

*My gods . . .*

It's barely past sunrise, and I've already risked two lives.

Six minutes.

That's how long Baba thrashed out at sea.

How long he fought against the current, how long his lungs ached for air.

As we sit in the silence of our empty ahéré, I can't get that number out of my head. The way Baba shivers, I'm convinced those six minutes took ten years off his life.

*This shouldn't have happened.* It's too early to have ruined the entire day. I should be outside cleaning the morning's haul with Baba. Tzain should be returning from agböñ practice to help.

Instead Tzain watches Baba, arms crossed, too enraged to throw a glance my way. Right now my only friend is Nailah, the faithful lionaire I've raised since she was a wounded cub. No longer a baby, my ryder towers over me, reaching Tzain's neck on all fours. Two jagged horns protrude behind her ears, dangerously close to puncturing our reed walls. I reach up and Nailah instinctively brings her giant head down, careful to maneuver the fangs curved over her jaw. She purrs as I scratch her snout. At least someone's not angry with me.

"What happened, Baba?"

Tzain's gruff voice cuts through the silence. We wait for an answer, but Baba's expression stays blank. He gazes at the floor with an emptiness that makes my heart ache.

"Baba?" Tzain bends down to meet his eyes. "Do you remember what happened?"

Baba pulls his blanket tighter. "I had to fish."

"But you're not supposed to go alone!" I exclaim.

Baba winces and Tzain glares at me, forcing me to soften my

tone. “Your blackouts are only getting worse,” I try again. “Why couldn’t you just wait for me to come home?”

“I didn’t have time.” Baba shakes his head. “The guards came. Said I had to pay.”

“What?” Tzain’s brows knit together. “Why? I paid them last week.”

“It’s a diviner tax.” I grip the draped fabric of my pants, still haunted by the guard’s touch. “They came for Mama Agba, too. Probably hitting every diviner home in Eloirin.”

Tzain presses his fists to his forehead as if he could smash through his own skull. He wants to believe that playing by the monarchy’s rules will keep us safe, but nothing can protect us when those rules are rooted in hate.

The same guilt from earlier resurfaces, squeezing until it sinks into my chest. If I wasn’t a diviner, they wouldn’t suffer. If Mama hadn’t been a maji, she’d still be alive today.

I dig my fingers through my hair, accidentally ripping a few strands from my scalp. Part of me considers cutting all of it off, but even without my white hair, my maji heritage would damn our family all the same. We are the people who fill the guards’ prisons, the people our kingdom turns into laborers. The people Orishans try to chase out of their features, outlawing our lineage as if white hair and dead magic were a societal stain.

Mama used to say that in the beginning, white hair was a sign of the powers of heaven and earth. It held beauty and virtue and love, it meant we were blessed by the gods above. But when everything changed, magic became a thing to loathe. Our heritage transformed into a thing to hate.

It’s a cruelty I’ve had to accept, but whenever I see that pain inflicted on Tzain or Baba, it cuts to new depths. Baba’s still

coughing up salt water, and already we're forced to think about making ends meet.

"What about the sailfish?" Tzain asks. "We can pay them with that."

I walk to the back of the hut and open our small iron icebox. In a bath of chilled seawater lies the red-tailed sailfish we wrangled yesterday, its glistening scales promising a delicious taste. A rare find in the Warri Sea, it's much too valuable for us to eat. But if the guards would take it—

"They refused to be paid in fish," Baba grumbles. "I needed bronze. Silver." He massages his temple like he could make the whole world disappear. "They told me to get the coin or they'd force Zélie into the stocks."

My blood runs cold. I whip around, unable to hide my fear. Run by the king's army, the stocks act as our kingdom's labor force, spreading throughout all of Orisha. Whenever someone can't afford the taxes, he's required to work off the debt for our king. Those stuck in the stocks toil endlessly, erecting palaces, building roads, mining coal, and everything in between.

It's a system that served Orisha well once, but since the Raid it's no more than a state-sanctioned death sentence. An excuse to round up my people, as if the monarchy ever needed one. With all the diviners left orphaned from the Raid, we are the ones who can't afford the monarchy's high taxes. We are the true targets of every raised tax.

*Dammit.* I fight to keep my terror inside. If I'm forced into the stocks, I'll never get out. No one who enters escapes. The labor is only supposed to last until the original debt is worked off, but when the taxes keep rising, so does the debt. Starved, beaten, and worse, the diviners are transported like cattle, forced to



work until our bodies break, nothing more than our kingdom's slaves.

I push my hands into the chilled seawater to calm my nerves. I can't let Baba and Tzain know how frightened I truly am. It'll only make it worse for all of us. But as my fingers start to shake, I don't know if it's from the cold or my terror. How is this happening? When did things get this bad?

"No," I whisper to myself.

Wrong question.

I shouldn't be asking when things got this bad. I should ask why I ever thought things had gotten better.

I look to the single black calla lily woven into the netted window of our hut, the only living connection to Mama I have left. She used to place calla lilies in the window of our old home in the village of Ibadan to honor her mother, a tribute maji pay to their dead.

Usually when I look at the flower, I remember the wide smile that came to Mama's lips when she would inhale its cinnamon scent. Today all I see in its wilted leaves is the black majacite chain that took the place of the gold amulet she always wore around her neck.

Though the memory is eleven years old, it's clearer to me now than my own vision.

*That was the night things got bad*, I decide. The night King Saran hung my people for the world to see, declaring war against the maji of today and tomorrow. The night magic died.

The night we lost everything.

Baba shudders and I run to his side, placing a hand on his back to keep him upright. His eyes hold no anger, only defeat. As he clings to the worn blanket, I wish I could see the warrior

I knew when I was a child. Before the Raid, he could fight off three armed men with nothing but a skinning knife in hand. But after the beating he got that night, it took him five moons before he could even talk.

They broke him that night, battered his heart and shattered his soul. Maybe he would've recovered if he hadn't woken to find Mama's corpse bound in black chains. But he did.

He's never been the same since.

"All right." Tzain sighs, always searching for an ember in the ashes. "Let's get out on the boat. If we leave now—"

"Won't work," I interrupt. "You saw the market. Everyone's scrambling to meet the tax. Even if we could bring in fish, whatever spare coin people have is gone."

"And we don't have a boat," Baba mutters. "I lost it this morning."

"What?" I didn't realize that the boat wasn't outside. I turn to Tzain, ready to hear his new plan, but he slumps to the reed floor.

*I'm done. . . .* I press into the wall and close my eyes.

No boat, no coin.

No way to avoid the stocks.

A heavy silence descends in the ahéré, cementing my sentence. *Maybe I'll be assigned to the palace.* At least then I could eat all the food they must waste.

Waiting on spoiled nobles would be preferable to coughing up coal dust in the mines of Calabrar or the other nefarious channels stockers can force diviners into. From what I've heard, the underground brothels aren't even close to the worst of what the stockers might make me do.

"All right." Tzain shifts in the corner. I know him. He's going

to offer to take my place. But as I prepare to protest, the thought of being assigned to the royal palace sparks an idea.

“What about Lagose?” I ask.

“Running away won’t work.”

“Not to run.” I shake my head. “That market’s filled with nobles. I can trade the sailfish there.”

Before either can comment on my genius, I grab parchment paper and run over to the sailfish. “I’ll come back with three moons’ worth of taxes. And coin for a new boat.” And Tzain can focus on his agbön matches. Baba can finally get some rest. *I can help.* I smile to myself. I can finally do something right.

“You can’t go.” Baba’s weary voice cuts into my thoughts. “It’s too dangerous for a divîner.”

“More dangerous than the stocks?” I ask. “Because if I don’t do this, that’s where I’m headed.”

“I’ll go to Lagose,” Tzain argues.

“No, you won’t.” I tuck the wrapped sailfish into my pack. “You can barely barter. You’ll blow the entire trade.”

“I may get less coin, but I can protect myself.”

“So can I.” I wave Mama Agba’s staff before tossing it into my pack.

“Baba, please.” Tzain shoos me away. “If Zél goes, she’ll do something stupid.”

“If I go, I’ll come back with more coin than we’ve ever seen.”

Baba’s brow creases as he deliberates. “Zélie should make the trade—”

“*Thank* you.”

“—but Tzain, keep her in line.”

“No.” Tzain crosses his arms. “You need one of us here in case the guards come back.”

“Take me to Mama Agba’s,” Baba says. “I’ll hide there until you return.”

“But Baba—”

“If you don’t leave now, you won’t be back by nightfall.”

Tzain closes his eyes, stifling his frustration. He starts loading Nailah’s saddle onto her massive back as I help Baba to his feet.

“I’m trusting you,” Baba mutters, too quiet for Tzain to hear.

“I know.” I tie the worn blanket around his thin frame. “I won’t mess up again.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Amari

*“Amari, sit up straight!”*

*“For sky’s sake—”*

*“That’s more than enough dessert for you.”*

I lower my forkful of coconut pie and push my shoulders back, almost impressed by the number of critiques Mother can hiss under her breath in one minute. She sits at the top of the brass table with a golden gele wrapped snug around her head. It seems to catch all the light in the room as it shimmers against her soft copper complexion.

I adjust the navy gele on my own head and try to appear regal, wishing the servant hadn’t wrapped it so tight. I can feel the blood being cut off from my brain as I attempt to look alert. Mother’s amber eyes scan the oloyes dressed in their finest, searching for the hyenaires hiding in the flock. Our female nobility paste on smiles, though I know they whisper about us behind our backs.

*“I heard she’s been pushed to western quarters—”*

*“She’s far too dark to be the king’s—”*

*“My servants swear the commander’s carrying Saran’s child—”*

They wear their secrets like glittering diamonds, embroidery woven through their lavish iro tops and long buba skirts. Their lies and lily-scented perfumes taint the honeyed aroma of sweet cakes I am no longer allowed to eat.

“And what is your opinion, Princess Amari?”

I snap my head up from the heavenly slice of pie to find Oloye Ronke studying me expectantly. Her emerald iro sparkles bright along her mahogany skin, chosen precisely for the way it shines against the white stucco of the tearoom walls.

“I beg your pardon?”

“On a visit to Zaria.” She leans forward until the fat ruby hanging from her throat grazes the table. The garish jewel serves as a constant reminder that Oloye Ronke wasn’t born with a seat at our table. She bought her way in.

“We would be honored to have you stay at our manor.” She fingers the large red gem, lips curving as she catches me staring. “I’m sure we could even find a jewel like this for you as well.”

“How kind of you,” I stall, tracing the path from Lagos to Zaria in my mind. Far past the Olasimbo Range, Zaria sits on the northern end of Orïsha, kissing the Adetunji Sea. My pulse quickens as I imagine visiting the world beyond the palace walls.

“Thank you,” I finally speak. “I would be honored—”

“But unfortunately Amari cannot,” Mother cuts in, frowning without the slightest hint of sadness. “She is in the thick of her studies and she’s already fallen behind in arithmetic. It would be far too disruptive to stop now.”

The excitement growing in my chest deflates. I poke at the uneaten pie on my plate. Mother rarely allows me to leave the palace. I should have known better than to hope.

“Perhaps in the future,” I say quietly, praying this small indulgence will not incite Mother’s wrath. “You must love living there—having the sea at your feet and the mountains at your back.”

“It’s just rocks and water.” Samara, Oloye Ronke’s eldest daughter, wrinkles her wide-set nose. “Nothing compared to this magnificent palace.” She flashes a smile at Mother, but her sweetness disappears when she turns back to me. “Besides, Zaria’s overrun with diviners. At least the maggots in Lagose know to stick to their slums.”

I tense at the cruelty of Samara’s words; they seem to hang above us in the air. I glance over my shoulder to see if Binta heard as well, but my oldest friend does not appear to be here. As the only diviner working in the upper palace, my chambermaid has always stood out, a living shadow forever by my side. Even with the bonnet Binta secures over her white hair, she’s still isolated from the rest of the serving staff.

“May I assist you, Princess?”

I turn over my other shoulder to see a servant I don’t recognize: a girl with chestnut skin and large, round eyes. She takes my half-empty cup and replaces it with another. I glance at the amber tea; if Binta were here, she would’ve snuck a spoonful of sugar into my cup when Mother wasn’t looking.

“Have you seen Binta?”

The girl draws back suddenly; her lips press together.

“What is it?”

The girl opens her mouth, but her eyes dart around the women at the table. “Binta was summoned to the throne room, Your Highness. A few moments before the luncheon began.”

I frown and tilt my head. What could Father possibly want with Binta? Of all the servants in the palace, he never summons her. He rarely summons servants at all.

“Did she say why?” I ask.

The girl shakes her head. She lowers her voice, choosing each

word with care. “No. But guards *escorted* her there.”

A sour taste crawls onto my tongue, bitter and dark as it travels down my throat. The guards in this palace do not escort. They take.

They demand.

The girl looks desperate to say more, but Mother shoots her a glare. Mother’s cold grip pinches my knee under the table.

*“Stop talking to the help.”*

I snap around and look down, hiding from Mother’s gaze. She narrows her eyes like a red-breasted firehawk on the hunt, just waiting for me to embarrass her again. But despite her frustration, I cannot get the thought of Binta out of my head. Father knows of our closeness—if he required something from her, why wouldn’t he go through me instead?

I stare out the paneled windows at the palace’s gardens as my questions grow, ignoring the empty laughter of the oloyes around me. With a lurch, the palace doors fly open.

My brother strides through.

Inan stands tall, handsome in his uniform as he prepares to lead his first patrol through Lagose. He beams among his fellow guards, his decorated helmet reflecting his recent promotion to captain. Everything he ever wanted. It’s all finally happening for him.

“Impressive, is he not?” Samara fixes her light brown eyes on my brother with a frightening lust. “Youngest captain in history. He will make an excellent king.”

“He will.” Mother glows, leaning in closer to the daughter she cannot wait to have. “Though I do wish the promotion was not accompanied by such violence. You never know what a desperate maggot might try with the crown prince.”



The oloyes nod and dispense useless opinions as I sip my tea in silence. They speak of our subjects with such levity, as if they were discussing the diamond-stitched geles sweeping Lagose's fashion. I turn back to the servant who told me about Binta. Though she is far away from my table, a nervous tremble still rocks her hand. . . .

"Samara." Mother's voice breaks into my thoughts, pulling my focus back. "Have I mentioned how regal you look today?"

I bite my tongue and drain the rest of my tea. Though Mother says "regal," the word "lighter" hides behind her lips.

Like Samara, Inan and I are marked with the blood of our father, noble lineage mixed with maji ancestors from a few generations back. A failed attempt to restore magic to the monarchy through royal kosidán and maji marriages only served to lighten our black hair and darken a fraction of our ancestors' skin.

Today the descendants of those nobles do whatever they can to hide the markers of their maji ancestry, dyeing their hair, using powders to lighten their pigmentation. As I peek at Samara from behind my cup, I'm struck by her new, soft brown complexion. It was only a few luncheons ago she shared her mother's mahogany coloring.

"You are too kind, Your Majesty." Samara looks down at her dress in false modesty, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles. "Thank you. Truly, your words mean the world."

"You must share your beauty regimen with Amari." Mother places a cold hand on my shoulder, fingers light against my darker copper skin. "She lounges in the gardens so often she's beginning to look like a farmhand." Mother laughs, as if a horde of servants don't cover me with sunshades whenever I step outside. Like she didn't coat me with powder before this very lun-

cheon began, cursing the way my complexion makes the nobility gossip that she slept with a servant.

“That is not necessary, Mother.” I cringe, remembering the sharp pain and the vinegar stench of her last cosmetic concoction.

“Oh, it would be my pleasure.” Samara beams.

“Yes, but—”

“Amari,” Mother cuts me off with a smile so tight it could split her skin. “She would love to, Samara, especially before courting begins.”

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but the very act almost makes me choke. In that moment, the smell of vinegar becomes so strong I can already feel the searing on my skin.

“Do not worry.” Samara grips my hand in her own, misreading my distress. “You will grow to love courting. It really is quite fun.”

I force a smile and try to pull my hand away, but Samara tightens her hold, as if I am not allowed to let go. Her gold rings press into my skin, each band set with a special stone. One ring feeds into a delicate chain, connecting to a bangle adorned with our monarchy’s seal: a diamond-studded snow leopard. Samara wears the bangle with pride. No doubt a gift from Mother. In spite of myself, I admire its beauty. It has even more diamonds than mine—

*Skies . . .*

Not mine. Not anymore.

A breath strangles inside my chest. Panic floods me as I remember what happened to my own bangle. The one I gave to Binta.

She did not want to take it; she feared the price of a gift from

the throne. But Father raised the diviner taxes. If she didn't sell my bangle, she and her family would've lost their home.

*They must have found out, I realize. They must think Binta is a thief.* That's why she's been summoned to the throne room. That's why she needed to be *escorted*.

I jump out of my seat. The legs of my chair screech against the tiled floor. I can already see the guards holding out Binta's delicate hands.

I can see Father swinging down his sword.

"Pardon me," I say as I step back.

"Amari, sit down."

"Mother, I—"

"Amari—"

"Mother, please!"

*Too loud.*

I know it the instant the words leave my mouth. My shrill voice bounces along the tearoom's walls, quieting all conversation.

"M-my apologies," I sputter. "I feel ill."

With all eyes burning into my back, I scurry toward the door. I can feel the heat of Mother's coming wrath, but I do not have time for that now. The moment the door shuts, I take off, hiking up my heavy gown. My heeled slippers clack against the tiled floors as I sprint through the halls.

*How could I be so foolish?* I chastise myself, swerving to avoid a servant. I should have left the moment that girl told me of Binta's summoning. If the roles were reversed, Binta would not have wasted a heartbeat.

*Oh skies,* I curse, pushing myself faster. Past the slender vases of red impala lilies in the foyer, past the portraits of my royal an-

cestors glaring at me from generations past.

*Please be okay.* I hold on to the silent hope as I round the corner into the main hall. The air is thick with heat, making it even harder to breathe. My heart beats in my throat as I slow before Father's throne room, the room I fear most. The place where he ordered Inan and I to spar.

The home of so many of my scars.

I grip the velvet curtains hanging outside the black oak doors. *He may not listen.* My sweat-covered hands soak into the rich fabric. I gave up the bangle. Father could punish me in Binta's stead.

A pulse of fear travels down my spine, numbing my fingers. *Do this for Binta.*

"For Binta," I whisper out loud.

My oldest friend. My *only* friend.

I have to keep her safe.

I take a deep breath and wipe the sweat from my hands, savoring my last few seconds. My fingers barely graze the handle glistening behind the curtains when—

"What?"

Father's voice booms through the closed doors like the roar of a wild gorillion. My heart pounds against my chest. I have heard Father yell before but never like this. *Am I too late?*

The door swings open and I jump back as a stream of guards and fanners sprint from the throne room like thieves on the run. They grab the remaining nobles and servants milling around the main hall and pull them away, leaving me all alone.

*Go.* My legs throb as the door starts to close. Father's mood has already soured. But I have to find Binta. For all I know, she could be trapped inside.

I can't let her face Father alone.

I lunge forward, catching the door just before it slips shut. I wedge my fingers into the frame and pull the door open a crack, peering through the slit.

"What do you mean?" Father shouts again, spittle flying onto his beard and his red agbada. Veins pulse under his mahogany skin.

I pull the door open a hair wider, fearing I'll catch sight of Binta's slender frame. But instead I see Admiral Ebele cowering before the throne. Beads of sweat gather on his bald head as he stares at everything except Father. Beside him, Commander Kaea stands tall, her hair falling down her neck in a tight, glossy braid.

"The artifacts washed ashore in Warri, a small village off the coast of the sea," Kaea explains. "Their proximity activated latent abilities in a few of the local diviners."

"Latent abilities?"

Kaea swallows; her muscles tense against her light brown skin. She gives Admiral Ebele a chance to talk, but the admiral stays silent.

"The diviners transformed." Kaea winces, as if the words cause her physical pain. "The artifacts awakened their powers, Your Highness. The diviners became maji."

I gasp but quickly cover my mouth to stifle the sound. *Maji? In Orisha? After all this time?*

A dull spike of fear travels up my chest, making each breath tight as I open the door a hair wider to get a better view. *That cannot be, I wait for Father to say. That would be—*

"Impossible," he finally speaks, voice barely above a whisper. He grips the pommel of his black majacite blade so hard his

knuckles crack.

“I am afraid not, Your Highness. I saw it with my own eyes. Their magic was weak, but it was there.”

*Skies . . .*

What does this mean for us? What shall happen to the monarchy? Are the maji already planning an attack? Will we have any chance of fighting back?

Memories of Father before the Raid play in my head, a paranoid man with grinding teeth and forever graying hair. The man who forced Inan and me into the palace cellar, placing swords in our hands though we were far too young and weak to lift them.

*The maji will come for you*, he warned. The same words every time he forced us to spar. When they do, you must be prepared.

The memory of pain stabs my back as I study Father’s blanched face. His silence is more intimidating than his rage. Admiral Ebele all but trembles.

“Where are the maji now?”

“Disposed of.”

My stomach clenches and I hold my breath, forcing the luncheon’s tea back down. Those maji are dead. Slaughtered.

Tossed to the bottom of the sea.

“And the artifacts?” Father presses, unfazed by the maji deaths. If he had his way, he’d probably “dispose” of the rest of them.

“I have the scroll.” Kaea reaches into her breastplate and pulls out a weathered parchment. “Once I discovered it, I took care of the witnesses and came straight here.”

“What of the sunstone?”

Kaea shoots Ebele a gaze so sharp it could draw blood. He clears his throat deeply, as if stretching out every last second be-

fore he delivers the news.

“The stone was stolen from Warri before we arrived, Your Highness. But we are tracking it. We have our best men on its path. I have no doubt we will recover it soon.”

Father’s rage simmers like heat rising through the air.

“You were tasked to destroy them,” he hisses. “*How* did this happen?”

“I tried, Your Highness! After the Raid, I tried for moons. I did everything I could to destroy them, but the artifacts were hexed.” Ebele’s eyes dart to Kaea, but she stares straight ahead. He clears his throat again. Sweat pools in the folds beneath his chin.

“When I ripped the scroll, it pieced itself back together. When I burned it, it formed again from the ashes. I had my strongest guard take a mace to the sunstone, and it did not even sustain a scratch! When those wretched artifacts wouldn’t break, I locked them in an iron chest and sank them in the middle of the Warri Sea. They could never have washed up on the coast! Not without mag—”

Ebele catches himself before uttering the word.

“I promise, Your Highness. I did what I could, but it would appear the gods have other plans.”

The gods? I lean in. Has Ebele’s mind gone to the skies? Gods don’t exist. Everyone in the palace knows that.

I wait for Father to react to Ebele’s foolishness, but his face remains even. He rises from his throne, calm and calculating. Then quick as a viper, he strikes, grabbing Ebele by the throat.

“Tell me, Admiral.” He raises Ebele’s body into the air and squeezes. “Whose plans do you fear more? The gods’? *Or mine?*”

I flinch, turning away as Ebele chokes for air. This is the side of Father I hate, the side I try so hard not to see.

“I—I promise,” Ebele wheezes. “I will fix it. I promise!”

Father drops him like a rotten piece of fruit. Ebele gasps and massages his neck, bruises already darkening his copper skin. Father turns back to the scroll in Kaea’s hand.

“Show me,” he commands.

Kaea gives a signal, motioning to someone outside my line of sight. Boots clank against the tiled floor. That’s when I see her.

*Binta.*

I clutch my chest as she’s dragged forward, tears gathering in her wide silver eyes. The bonnet she takes so much care to tie every day sits askew, revealing locks of her long white hair. Someone has gagged her with a scarf, making it impossible for her to shout. But if she could, who would help her? She’s already in the guards’ grasps.

*Do something,* I order myself. *Now.* But I cannot bring my legs to move. I cannot even feel my hands.

Kaea unrolls the scroll and walks forward slowly, as if approaching a wild animal. Not the sweet girl who has wiped my tears for so many years. The servant who saves all her palace rations so her family can enjoy one good meal.

“Raise her arm.”

Binta shakes her head as the guards yank up her wrist, her muffled cries breaking through the scarf. Though Binta resists, Kaea pushes the scroll into her grip.

Light explodes from Binta’s hand.

It coats the throne room in its magnificence—brilliant golds, shining purples, sparkling blues. The light arcs and shimmers as it cascades, a never-ending stream erupting from Binta’s palm.



“Skies,” I gasp, terror at war with the awe bubbling inside my chest.

*Magic.*

Here. After all these years . . .

Father’s old warnings of magic bloom inside my head, tales of battle and fire, darkness and disease. *Magic is the source of all evil*, he hisses. *It will tear Orisha apart.*

Father always taught Inan and I that magic meant our deaths. A dangerous weapon threatening the peace in Orisha. As long as it existed, our kingdom would always be at war.

In the darkest days following the Raid, magic took hold inside my imagination, a monster without a face. But in Binta’s hands, magic is mesmerizing, a wonder like no other. The joy of the summer sun melting into twilight. The very essence and breath of life—

Father strikes fast. Quick like lightning.

One moment Binta stands.

In the next, Father’s sword plunges through her chest.

*No!*

I clasp my hand to my mouth before I can scream, nearly falling onto my back. Nausea rises to my throat. Hot tears sting my eyes.

*This isn’t happening.* The world starts to spin. *This isn’t real. Binta is safe. She’s waiting with a loaf of sweet bread. She’s sitting in your room.*

But my desperate thoughts do not change the truth. They do not bring back the dead.

Red seeps through the scarf binding Binta’s mouth.

Crimson flowers stain her light blue dress.

I choke back another scream as her corpse thuds to the

ground, heavy like lead.

Blood pools around Binta's innocent face, dyeing her white locks scarlet. Its copper smell wafts through the crack in the door. I stifle a gag.

Father yanks off Binta's apron and uses it to clean his sword. Completely at ease. He doesn't care that her blood stains his royal robes.

He doesn't see that her blood stains my own hands.

I scramble backward onto my feet, tripping over the hem of my dress. I rush up the stairwell at the corner of the main hall, my legs shaking with every step. My vision blurs as I fight to make it to my quarters, but it's all I can do to rush over to a vase. I grab onto the ceramic rim. Everything inside me comes back up.

The bile stings something fierce, bitter with acid and tea. The first sob breaks free as my body collapses. I clutch my chest.

If Binta were here, she would be the one to come to my rescue. She would take my hand and guide me to my quarters, sit me on my bed, and wipe my tears. She would take all the shattered pieces of my heart and find a way to make them whole again.

I choke back another sob and cover my mouth, salty tears leaking through my fingers. The stench of blood fills my nose. The memory of Father's blade stabs again—

The throne room doors slam open. I jump to my feet, fearing it's Father. Instead, one of the guards who restrained Binta leaves.

The scroll sits in his hands.

I stare at the weathered parchment as he climbs the stairs, recalling how just one touch made the world explode with light.

Light trapped inside my dear friend's soul, unbelievably beautiful, eternally bold.

I turn away as the soldier nears, hiding my tearstained face.

"Forgive me, I'm unwell," I murmur. "I must have eaten some rotten fruit."

The guard barely nods, distracted as he ascends the stairs. He grips the scroll so hard his knuckles darken, as if afraid of what the magical parchment will do if he doesn't. I watch as he walks to the third floor and pushes a painted black door open. Suddenly I realize where he's headed.

Commander Kaea's quarters.

Seconds ache by as I watch the door, waiting, though I do not know why. Waiting will not bring Binta back, allow me to enjoy her melodic laugh. But still I wait, freezing when the door reopens. I turn back to the vase and retch once more, not stopping until the guard passes me again. His metal-soled boots clink as he heads back down to the throne room. The scroll is no longer in his grip.

With shaking hands, I wipe my tears, no doubt smearing the paints and powders Mother forced onto my face. I run my palm over my mouth, taking any remnants of vomit away. Questions fill my mind as I rise and approach Kaea's door. I should continue to my quarters.

Yet I step inside.

The door shuts behind me with a loud thud and I jump, wary that someone will seek out the source of the sound. I have never stepped foot in Commander Kaea's quarters. I don't even think the servants are allowed in here.

My eyes comb the burgundy walls, so different from the lavender paint that covers my own. A royal cloak lies at the foot

of Kaea's bed. Father's cloak . . . He must have left it behind.

On another day the realization that Father was in Kaea's quarters would've made me faint, but I can barely feel anything now. The discovery of Father's cloak pales in comparison to the scroll sitting on Kaea's desk.

I step toward it, legs throbbing as if approaching the edge of a cliff. I expect to feel some aura in the scroll's presence, yet the air surrounding it remains dead. I reach out, but pause, swallowing the fear that begins to swell. I see the light that exploded from Binta's hands.

The sword that pierced through her chest.

I push myself, reaching out again with the very ends of my fingertips. When they brush the scroll, I close my eyes.

No magic comes forth.

The breath I did not realize I was holding rushes out as I pick up the wrinkled parchment. I unroll the scroll and trace the strange symbols, trying in vain to make sense of them. The symbols look like nothing I have ever seen, no language ever covered in my studies. Yet they are symbols that maji died for.

Symbols that might as well be written in Binta's blood.

A breeze flutters from the open windows, stirring the locks of hair that have fallen out from my loosened gele. Underneath the flowing curtains, Kaea's military supplies sit: sharpened swords, panthenaire reins, brass chest plates. My eyes settle on the spools of rope. I knock my gele to the floor.

Without thinking, I grab Father's robe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Zélie

“Are you really not going to talk to me?”

I lean to the side of Nailah’s saddle to get a look at Tzain’s stone face. I expected the first hour of silence, but now it’s hour three.

“How was practice?” I try instead. Tzain can never resist a conversation about his favorite sport. “Is M’ballu’s ankle okay? Do you think she’ll be healed in time for the games?”

Tzain’s mouth opens for a split second, but he catches himself. His jaw clamps shut and he smacks Nailah’s reins, riding her faster through the towering jackalberry trees.

“Tzain, come on,” I say. “You can’t ignore me for the rest of your life.”

“I can try.”

“My gods.” I roll my eyes. “What do you want from me?”

“How about an apology?” Tzain snaps. “Baba almost died! And now you want to sit here and pretend like it never happened?”

“I already said sorry,” I snap back. “To you, to Baba.”

“That doesn’t change what happened.”

“Then I’m sorry I can’t change the past!”

My yell echoes through the trees, igniting a new stretch of silence between us. I run my fingers along the cracks of worn leather in Nailah’s saddle as an uncomfortable pit forms in my

chest.

*For gods' sakes, think, Zélie, Mama Agba's voice echoes in my mind. Who would protect your father if you hurt those men? Who would keep Tzain safe when the guards come for blood?*

"Tzain, I'm sorry," I say quietly. "Really. I feel awful, more than you can know, but—"

Tzain releases a sigh of exasperation. "Of course there's a but."

"Because this isn't just my fault!" I say, my anger reaching a boiling point. "The guards are the reason Baba went out on the water!"

"And you're the reason he almost drowned," Tzain shoots back. "*You* left him alone."

I bite my tongue. There's no point in arguing. Strong and handsome kosidán that he is, Tzain doesn't understand why I need Mama Agba's training. Boys in Eloirin try to be his friend, girls try to steal his heart. Even the guards flock his way, singing praises of his agbö skills.

He doesn't understand what it's like to be me, to walk around in a divîner's skin. To jump every time a guard appears, never knowing how a confrontation will end.

*I'll start with this one . . .*

My stomach clenches at the memory of the guard's rough grip. Would Tzain yell at me if he knew? Would he shout if he realized how hard it was for me not to cry?

We ride in silence as the trees begin to thin and the city of Lagose comes into view. Surrounded by a gate crafted from the heartwood of the jackalberry trees, the capital could not be more different from Eloirin. Instead of the calming sea, Lagose is flooded with an endless horde of people. Even from afar, so

many swell within the city walls it's impossible to understand how they all live.

I survey the layout of the capital from atop Nailah's back, noting the white hair of passing diviners along the way. Lagose's kosidán outnumber its diviners three to one, making them easy to spot. Though the space between Lagose's walls is long and wide, my people congregate along the city's fringe in slums. It's the only place they'd allow diviners to live.

I settle back in Nailah's saddle, the sight of the slums deflating something in my chest. Centuries ago, the ten maji clans and their diviner children were isolated all over Orisha. While kosidán populated the cities, the clans lived along the mountains and oceans and fields. But with time, maji ventured out and clans spread across Orisha's lands, curiosity and opportunity driving their migration.

Over the years maji and kosidán began to marry, creating families with diviners and kosidán like mine. As the blended families multiplied, the number of Orisha's maji grew. Before the Raid, Lagose housed the biggest maji population.

Now those diviners are all that's left.

Tzain pulls on Nailah's reins, stopping her when we near the wooden gate. "I'll wait here. It'll be too crazy for her in there."

I nod and slide off, giving Nailah's dark, wet nose a kiss. I smile as her rough tongue licks my cheek, but the smile fades when I glance back at Tzain. Unspoken words hang in the air, but I turn and keep moving forward all the same.

"Wait."

Tzain slides off Nailah, catching up to me in a single bound. He places a rusted dagger into my hand.

"I have a staff."

“I know,” he says. “Just in case.”

I slide the weapon into my worn pocket. “Thanks.”

We stare at the dirt ground in silence. Tzain kicks a rock by his feet. I don’t know who will break first until he finally speaks.

“I’m not blind, Zél. I know this morning wasn’t all your fault, but I need you to do better.” For a moment Tzain’s eyes flash, threatening to reveal everything he holds back. “Baba’s only getting worse, and the guards are breathing down your neck. You can’t afford to slip right now. If you make another mistake, it could be your last.”

I nod, keeping my gaze on the ground. I can handle a lot of things, but Tzain’s disappointment cuts like a knife.

“Just do better,” Tzain sighs. “Please. Baba won’t survive if he loses you. . . . I won’t, either.”

I try to ignore the tightness in my chest. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Good.” Tzain pastes a smile on his face and ruffles my hair. “Enough of this. Go sell the hell out of that fish.”

I laugh and readjust the straps on my pack. “How much do you think I can get?”

“Two hundred.”

“That’s it?” I cock my head. “You really think that lowly of me?”

“That’s crazy coin, Zél!”

“I bet you I can get more.”

Tzain’s smile widens, gleaming with the shine of a good bet. “Get above two hundred and I’ll stay home with Baba next week.”

“Oh, you’re on.” I grin, already picturing my rematch with Yemi. Let’s see how she does against my new staff.



I rush forward, ready to make the trade, but when I reach the checkpoint, my stomach churns at the sight of the royal guards. It's all I can do to keep my body still as I slide my collapsible staff into the waistband of my draped pants.

"Name?" a tall guard barks, keeping his eyes on his ledger. His dark curls fuzz in the heat, collecting the sweat dripping down his cheeks.

"Zélie Adebola," I answer with as much respect as I can muster. *No screwups*. I swallow hard. *At least, no more today*.

The guard barely spares me a glance before writing the information down. "Origin?"

"Eloirin."

"Eloirin?"

Short and stout, another guard wobbles as he approaches, using the giant wall to keep himself upright. The pungent smell of alcohol wafts into the air with his unwelcome presence.

"Wha's a maggot like you doin' s'far from 'ome?"

His words slur just before incomprehension, dripping from his mouth like the spittle on his chin. My chest clenches as he nears; the drunken glaze in his eyes turns dangerous.

"Purpose of visit?" the tall, thankfully sober guard asks.

"Trading."

At this, a disgusting smile crawls onto the drunk guard's face. He reaches for my wrist, but I back away and raise the wrapped package.

"Trading *fish*," I clarify, but despite my words, he lunges forward. I grunt as he wraps his pudgy hands around my neck and presses me against the wooden wall. He leans in so close I can count the black and yellow stains on his teeth.

"I can see why you're sellin' the fish." He laughs. "What's the

goin' rate for a maggot these days, Kayin? Two bronze pieces?"

My skin crawls and my fingers itch for my hidden staff. It's against the law for maji and kosidán to so much as kiss after the Raid, but it doesn't keep the guards from pawing at us like animals.

My anger twists into a black rage, a darkness I sensed in Mama whenever the guards dared to get in her way. With its rush, I want to shove him back and snap each of the soldier's fat fingers. But with my rage comes Tzain's concern. Baba's heartache. Mama Agba's scolding.

*Think, Zélie. Think of Baba. Think of Tzain. You promised not to mess this up.*

I repeat this again and again until the brute unhands me. He laughs to himself before taking another swig from his bottle, proud. At ease.

I turn toward the other guard, unable to hide the hatred in my eyes. I don't know who I despise more—the drunk for touching me or this bastard for letting it occur.

"Any other questions?" I ask through my teeth.

The guard shakes his head.

I move through the gate with the speed of a cheetanaire before either can change his mind. But it only takes a few steps away from the gates before the frenzy of Lagose makes me want to run back outside.

"My gods," I breathe, overwhelmed by the sheer number of people. Villagers, merchants, guards, and nobles fill the wide dirt roads, each moving with precision and purpose.

In the distance, the royal palace looms—its pristine white walls and gilded arches gleaming in the sun. Its presence is a stark contrast to the slums lining the city's fringe.

I marvel at the rustic dwellings, breath catching at the towering shacks. Like a vertical labyrinth, the shanties sit atop one another, each starting where another stops. Though many are brown and fading, others shine with bright paints and colorful art. The vibrant protest defies the title of slum, an ember of beauty where the monarchy sees none.

With tentative steps, I begin walking toward the city center. As I pass the slums, I notice the vast majority of the diviners roaming its streets aren't much older than me. In Lagose, it's almost impossible for any diviner children who lived through the Raid to reach adulthood without being thrown in prison or getting forced into the stocks.

"Please. I didn't mean to—*agh!*" A sharp cry rings out.

I jump as a stocker's cane strikes down in front of me. It cuts through the flesh of a young diviner, leaving bloodstains on the last clean clothes the boy will ever wear. The child falls into a pile of broken ceramics, shattered tiles his thin arms probably couldn't hold. The stocker raises his cane again, and this time I catch the gleam of its black majacite shaft.

*Gods.* The acrid smell of burning flesh hits me as the stocker presses the cane into the boy's back. Smoke rises from his skin as he struggles to crawl to his knees. The vicious sight makes my fingers numb, reminding me of my own potential fate in the stocks.

*Come on.* I force myself forward though my heart sinks. *Move or that'll be you.*

I rush toward the center of Lagose, doing my best to ignore the smell of sewage leaking from the slum streets. When I enter the pastel-colored buildings of the merchant quarter, the odor shifts to sweet bread and cinnamon, making my stomach growl.

I brace myself for the barter as the central exchange hums with the sounds of endless trading. But when the bazaar comes into view, I'm forced to stop in my tracks.

No matter how often I trade big catch here with Baba, the madness of the central market never ceases to amaze me. More tumultuous than the streets of Lagose, the bazaar is alive with every Orishan good imaginable. In one row alone, grains from the vast fields of Minna sit alongside coveted ironworks from the factories of Gombe. I walk through the crowded booths, enjoying the sweet smell of fried plantain.

With ears perked, I try to catch the pattern of the barter, the speed of every trade. Everyone fights, using words as knives. It's more cutthroat than the market of Eloirin; here, there's no compromise. Only business.

I pass wooden stalls of cheetanaire cubs, smiling at the tiny horns protruding from their foreheads. I have to wade past carts of patterned textiles before finally reaching the fish exchange.

"Forty bronze pieces—"

"For a tigerfish?"

"I won't pay a piece above thirty!"

The shouts of hagglers at work ring so loud I can barely hear myself think. This isn't the floating market of Eloirin. A regular barter won't work. I bite the inside of my cheek, surveying the crowd. I need a mark. A fool, some—

"Trout!" a man shrieks. "Do I look like I eat trout?"

I turn to the plump noble clad in a dark purple dashiki. He narrows his hazel eyes at the kosidán merchant like he has just received a grave insult.

"I have searobin," the merchant offers. "Flounder, bass—"

"I said I want swordfish!" the noble snaps. "My servant says

you refuse to sell it.”

“They aren’t in season.”

“Yet the king eats it every night?”

The merchant scratches the back of his neck. “If a swordfish is caught, it goes to the palace. That’s the law of the land.”

The noble’s face turns red and he pulls out a small velvet purse. “What does he offer?” He jingles the coins. “I’ll pay double.”

The merchant stares at the purse longingly but stays firm. “I can’t risk it.”

“I can!” I shout.

The noble turns, eyes narrowed with suspicion. I wave him toward me, away from the merchant’s stand.

“You have swordfish?” he asks.

“Better. A fish no one else in this market can sell you.”

His mouth falls open, and I feel the same rush I get when a fish circles my bait. I unwrap the sailfish with care and move it under a ray of light so that its scales gleam.

“Skies!” The noble gapes. “It’s magnificent.”

“It tastes even better than it looks. Red-finned sailfish, fresh from the coast of Eloirin. They’re not in season, so you can be sure even the king’s not eating this tonight.”

A smile crawls onto the noble’s face, and I know I’ve made my own catch. He holds out his purse.

“Fifty silver pieces.”

My eyes widen, but I grit my teeth. *Fifty* . . .

Fifty gets us by this tax, maybe leaves us enough for a new boat. But if the guards raise the taxes next quarter moon, fifty won’t keep me out of the stocks.

I let out a loud laugh and start rewrapping the fish.

The noble's brow furrows. "What are you doing?"

"Taking this jewel to someone who can afford it."

"How dare you—"

"Forgive me," I interrupt. "I don't have time for a man who bids fifty on a prize worth ten times that much."

The noble grumbles, but he reaches into his pockets and pulls out another velvet purse.

"You won't get a piece above three hundred."

*My gods!* I dig my feet into the dirt to keep myself from wobbling. That's more than we've ever seen in our lives. At least six moons of taxes, even if they're raised!

I open my mouth to take the deal, but something in the noble's eyes makes me hesitate. If he folded so quickly on the last offer, maybe he'll fold again.

*Take it, I imagine Tzain warning. It's more than enough.*

I should listen to him. But I'm too close to stop now.

"I'm sorry." I shrug and finish wrapping the sailfish. "I can't waste a meal for a king on someone who can't afford it."

The noble's nostrils flare. *Gods.* I may have gone too far. I wait for him to break, but he only seethes in silence. I'm forced to walk away.

Each step lasts an eternity as I crumble under the weight of my mistake. *You'll find another one, I try to calm myself. Another noble desperate to prove his worth.* I can do better than three hundred. The fish is worth more than that . . . right?

"Dammit." I almost ram my head against a shrimp stall. What am I going to do now? Who's going to be stupid enough to—

"Wait!"

As I turn, the plump noble shoves three jingling purses into my chest.

“Fine,” he grumbles in defeat. “Five hundred.”

I stare at him in disbelief, which he mistakes for doubt.

“Count them if you must.”

I open one purse and the sight is so beautiful I nearly cry. The silver shines like the scales of the sailfish, its weight a promise of things to come. *Five hundred!* After a new boat, that’s almost a year’s worth of rest for Baba. *Finally.*

I’ve done something right.

I hand the fish to the noble, unable to hide my glowing smile. “Enjoy. Tonight you’ll eat better than the king.”

The noble sneers, but the corners of his mouth twitch up in satisfaction. I slide the velvet purses into my pack and start walking, heart buzzing so quickly it rivals the insanity of the market. But I freeze when screams fill the air. This isn’t the sound of haggling. *What the—*

I jump back as a fruit stand explodes.

A troop of royal guards charges through. Mangoes and Orishan peaches fly through the air. Second by second, more guards flood the market, searching for something. Someone.

I stare at the commotion in bewilderment before realizing I have to move. There’re five hundred silver pieces in my pack. For once, I have more than my life to lose.

I push through the crowd with a new fervor, desperate to escape. I’m almost past the textiles when someone grabs my wrist.

*What in gods’ names?*

I whip out my compacted staff, expecting to meet the arm of a royal guard or a petty thief. But when I turn, it’s neither a guard nor a crook who’s grabbed me.

It’s a cloaked, amber-eyed girl.

She pulls me into a hidden crevice between two stalls with a

*Tomi Adeyemi*

grip so tight I can't fight my way free.

"Please," she begs, "you have to get me out of here!"





## CHAPTER FIVE

Zélie

For a moment, I can't breathe.

The copper-skinned girl shakes with a fear so visceral it leaks into my skin.

Shouts grow louder as the guards thunder by, getting closer with each passing second. They can't catch me with this girl.

If they do, I'll die.

"Let me go," I order, almost as desperate as she is.

"No! No, *please*." Tears well in her amber eyes and her grasp tightens. "Please help me! I have done something unforgivable. If they catch me . . ."

Her eyes fill with a terror that is all too familiar. Because when they catch her, it's not a matter of whether she'll die, it's only a question of when: on the spot? Starving in the jails? Or will the guards take turns passing her around? Destroy her from within until she suffocates from grief?

*You must protect those who can't defend themselves.* Mama Agba's words from this morning seep into my head. I picture her stern gaze. *That is the way of the staff.*

"I can't," I breathe, but even as the words leave my mouth, I brace myself for the fight. *Dammit.*

It doesn't matter if I can help.

I won't be able to live with myself if I don't.

"Come on." I grab the girl's arm and barge into a clothing stall

larger than the rest. Before the cloth merchant can scream, I put my hand over her mouth and press Tzain's dagger to her neck.

"Wh-what are you doing?" the girl asks.

I inspect her cloak. How did she even make it this far? The girl's copper skin and thick robes scream of noble blood, rich with velvet and golden hues.

"Put on that brown cloak," I order her before turning back to the merchant. Beads of sweat drip down her skin; with a diviner thief, one wrong move could be her last. "I'm not going to hurt you," I promise. "I just need to make a trade."

I peek out the front of the stall as the girl changes into the muted cloak, tightening my grasp when the merchant lets out a muffled yelp. The market's crawling with enough guards to fill an army. The scrambling traders and villagers add to the chaos. I search for a way out of this madness, but no escape route emerges. We have no choice.

We'll just have to test our fortune.

I duck back into the stall as the girl pulls the hood of her new cloak low over her forehead. I grab the fine robe she was wearing and shove it into the merchant's hands. The fear in the trader's eyes dims as the soft velvet passes through her fingers.

I lower the dagger from her neck and grab a cloak of my own, hiding my white hair under its dark hood.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

The girl manages a nod. A hint of determination flashes in her eyes, but I still detect a paralyzing terror.

"Follow me." We exit the stall and step into the pandemonium. Though guards stop right in front of us, our brown cloaks act as a shield. They're searching for noble blood. *Thank the gods.*

Maybe we actually have a chance.

“Walk quickly,” I hiss under my breath as we move through the spaces of the textile stalls. “But don’t—” I grab her by the cloak before she goes too far. “Don’t run. You’ll draw attention. Blend into the crowd.”

The girl nods and tries to speak, but no words come out. It’s all she can do to tail me like a lionaire cub, never more than two steps behind.

We push through the crowd until we reach the market’s edge. Though guards cover the main entrance, there’s an opening on the side manned by only one guard. When he steps forward to interrogate a noble, I spot our chance.

“Quick.” I squeeze behind a stock trader’s stall to slip from the crowded market down the stone streets of the merchant quarter. I breathe a sigh of relief as the girl’s petite frame breaks free, but when we turn, two hulking guards block our path.

*Oh gods.* My feet skid to a stop. The silver coins jingle in my pack. I glance at the girl; her brown skin has lost most of its color.

“Is there a problem?” I ask the guards as innocently as I can.

One crosses his treelike arms. “Fugitive’s on the loose. No one leaves until she’s caught.”

“Our mistake,” I apologize with a respectful bow. “We’ll wait inside.”

*Dammit.* I turn and walk back toward the stalls, scanning the frantic market. If all the exits are covered, we need a new plan. We need a new way to get—

Wait.

Though I’m almost back in the market, the girl isn’t by my side. I turn to find her frozen before the guards, the slightest

tremble visible in her awkwardly placed hands.

*For gods' sakes!*

I open my mouth to hiss her name, but I don't even know it. I've risked everything for a stranger. And now she's going to get us killed.

I try to distract the guards, but one is already reaching for the girl's hood. There's no time. I grab my metal rod and flick. "Duck!"

The girl drops to the ground. I whip my staff and smack it against the guard's skull—and a sickening crack rings through the air as he collapses into the dirt. Before the other can unsheathe his sword, I thrust my staff into his sternum.

*"Ugh!"*

With a swift kick to the jaw, he falls back, lying unconscious in the red dirt.

"Skies!" The girl curses like a noble. I retract my staff. *Skies* is right. Now I've attacked the guards.

Now we're really going to die.

Tzain's imminent fury flashes in my mind as we take off, sprinting as fast as we can through the merchant quarter.

*Don't screw this up. Get in. Get out.* Where in that plan did it make sense to help a fugitive?

As we tear through the streets lined with pastel-colored buildings, two troops of royal guards fight to take us down. Their shouts grow loud. Their footsteps pound even louder. With swords drawn, they close in, only a few paces behind.

"Do you know where we are?" I ask.

"A little," she pants, eyes wide with panic. "Enough to get us to the slums, but—"

"Head there!"

She pushes forward, sprinting a step ahead of me to take the lead. I follow her as we run through the stone streets, blowing by confused merchants in our dash. Adrenaline rushes through my veins. Heat buzzes beneath my skin. We're not going to make it. There's no way we'll escape.

*Relax*, I hear Mama Agba in my head. I force myself to take a deep breath. *Be resourceful. Use the surroundings to your advantage.*

I scan the compact streets of the merchant quarter in desperation. As we round the corner, I spy a towering stack of wooden barrels. *That'll do.* It's enough to slow the guards down.

I expand my staff and take a giant swing at the tower's base. When the first barrel comes crashing to the ground, I know the rest are soon to follow.

The guards' screams fill the air as the barrels take them down. The diversion gives us enough time to sprint into the slums and stop to catch our breaths.

"What now?" the girl gasps.

"You don't know the way out?"

She shakes her head, sweat dripping down her face. "I've never been to this part of town."

The slums looked like a labyrinth from afar, but from within, the shacks and shanties cluster like a web. The narrow paths and dirt streets tangle before our eyes. There's no exit in sight.

"This way." I point to the street opposite the merchant quarter. "If that way leads toward the city center, this has to lead out."

We kick up clouds of dirt running as fast as we can. But a troop of guards cuts us off—we have no choice but to dash the other way.

"Skies," the girl gasps as we race through an alley, riling up

a group of homeless kosidán. For a moment, I'm amazed she's made it this far. I doubt any of this was part of her noble education.

We round another corner, just paces ahead of the guards. I push myself to run faster when the girl yanks me back.

"What are you—"

She presses her hand to my mouth and pushes me against a shanty's wall. It's only then that I notice the narrow space we've squeezed between.

*Please work.* For only the second time in over a decade, I lift up a prayer, calling to any god who might still be there. *Please, I beg. Please, please hide us.*

My heart threatens to break free of my rib cage, pounding so hard I'm convinced the sound will give us away. But when the troop nears, they rumble by like bull-horned rhinomes.

I look up to the sky, blinking as the clouds pass overhead. Bright rays of light shine in between their gaps. It's almost like the gods have risen from the dead, resurrected from the graveyard formed after the carnage of the Raid. Whatever's up there is blessing me.

I just hope that blessing doesn't run out.

We shimmy out of the crawl space and tear down another path, accidentally slamming into a pair of curious diviners. One drops his bottle of rum, and the sharp scent wafts into my nose, so strong my nostrils burn. With its odor, another lesson from Mama Agba's hut resurfaces, taking hold.

I scoop the bottle off the ground and scan the streets for my missing ingredient. My heart skips a beat. *There.* It's only a few meters from the girl's head.

"Grab the torch!"

“What?”

“The torch!” I shriek. “The one right in front of you!”

It takes her a second to wrestle the metal torch from its hold, but when she does, we take off running. As we pass the last of the slums, I rip a piece of cloth from my cloak and stuff it into the bottle.

“What is this for?” she asks.

“Let’s hope you don’t have to find out.”

We break free of the slums, and the wooden gate of Lagose’s entrance comes into view. The key to our escape.

Barred by a royal blockade.

My stomach sinks as we skid to a halt before the endless line of armed guards. The soldiers ride menacing black panthenaires, each giant beast baring its fangs. Their dark fur shines like a thin layer of oil under the sun, matte rainbows of color embedded throughout their black coats. Even as the panthenaires crouch, they still tower over us, primed and ready to pounce.

“You’re surrounded!” The captain’s amber eyes bore into me. “By the decree of King Saran, I order you to halt!”

Unlike his soldiers, the captain rides a vicious snow leopanaire nearly as big as my hut. Eight thick horns protrude from its back, sharp and glistening in black. The monster licks its long, serrated fangs as it snarls, eager to decorate its spotted white coat with our blood.

The captain has the same dark copper complexion as the girl, skin free of wrinkles and the scars of battle. When the girl sees him, her hands fly to her hood; her legs begin to shake.

Though the captain is young, the guards follow his lead without question. One by one, each soldier unsheathes his sword, pointing

the blades our way.

“It’s over,” the girl breathes in dismay. Tears stream down her face as she kneels to the ground. She drops the torch in defeat and pulls out a scroll of wrinkled parchment.

I pretend to follow her lead and crouch, touching the cloth in the bottle to the torch’s flame. The acrid stench of smoke fills my nose. As the captain closes in, I hurl the weapon at the line of panthenaires.

*Come on*, I will the glass bottle, trailing its arc with my eyes. As it flies, I worry that nothing will happen.

Then the world erupts in flames.

The fire burns brilliantly, sweeping men and horned panthenaires into its blaze. The beasts howl in hysteria, bucking their riders in an attempt to get away.

The girl stares in horror, but I grab her arm and force her to move. We’re only a few meters away from the gate now, only a few meters away from freedom.

“Close the gate!” the captain yells as I brush by. The girl crashes into him but manages to slip through his grasp when he stumbles.

The metal gears groan and churn and the wooden gate starts falling down. The checkpoint guards brandish their weapons, our last obstacles to freedom.

“We won’t make it!” the girl wheezes.

“We don’t have a choice!”

I sprint faster than I knew was possible to run. The drunk guard from before unsheathes his sword, raising his arm to slash. His sluggish movement invites more laughter than fear. I smack his skull with a vengeance, taking an extra second to knee him in the groin when he drops.



Another guard manages to get in a swing of his sword, but it's easy to block with my staff. I spin the metal rod in my hands, knocking the sword from his grip. His eyes widen as I deliver a roundhouse kick to the face, slamming him against the wooden gate before I pass.

*We did it!* I want to scream as I run under the cover of the jackalberry trees. I turn to smile at the girl, but she's not there. My heart seizes as I watch her tumble to the ground, a finger's breadth before the gate. Clouds of dirt greet her fall.

"No!" I shriek. The gate's only moments away from shutting. After all that, she's not going to make it.

After coming so close, she's going to die.

*Run, I order myself. Escape. You have Tzain. Baba. You've done all you can.*

But the despair in her eyes pulls me back, and I know my blessings have run out. Because despite every protest in my body, I dash through the gates, rolling through moments before they slam shut.

"You're done." The captain steps forward, bloody from the firebomb. "Drop your weapon. Now!"

It seems like every guard in Lagose is staring us down. They circle us in droves, blocking each path before we can attempt another escape.

I pull the girl to her feet and hold my staff high. They will not take me. I will force them to kill me where I stand.

My heart slams against my chest as the guards close in. I take a moment to enjoy my last breaths. I picture Mama's face. Her soft eyes, her ebony skin.

*I'm coming,* I close my eyes and think of her spirit. She probably roams alâfia now, floating through the peace of the afterlife.

I imagine myself beside her. *I'll be with you so—*

A thunderous roar rings through the air, freezing the guards in their steps. The cry grows louder and louder, deafening in its approach. I barely have enough time to pull the girl out of harm's way when Nailah's monstrous figure leaps over the gate.

Guards tumble back in fear as my lionaire lands on the dirt path, saliva dripping from her massive fangs. I'm convinced she's a hallucination until I hear Tzain shouting from atop Nailah's back.

"The hell you waiting for?" he yells. "*Get on!*"

Without wasting another second, I hop onto Nailah's back and pull the girl aboard. We take off, jumping from shack to shack before the shanties crumble under her weight. When Nailah gets enough height, she makes a final leap, flying toward the gate.

We've almost cleared it when a shock like lightning surges through my veins.

The shock travels through every pore in my skin, igniting my being, catching my breath. Time seems to freeze as I look down, locking eyes with the young captain.

An unknown force burns behind his amber gaze, a prison I can't escape. Something in his spirit seems to claw onto mine. But before I can spend another second locked in his eyes, Nailah flies over the gate, severing our connection.

She lands on the ground with a thud and takes off, thundering through the jackalberry trees.

"My gods," I breathe. Every part of my body screams with strain. I can't believe we actually made it.

I can't believe I'm not dead.

## CHAPTER SIX

Inan

Failure.

Disappointment.

Disgrace.

Which insult shall Father brand me with today?

I run through the possibilities as I walk through the gate and ascend the white marble steps of the palace. “Failure” would be fitting. I’m returning with no fugitive in hand. But Father might not waste his words.

He could lead with his fist.

This time, I cannot blame him. Not truly.

If I can’t defend Lagose from a single thief, how in the world am I supposed to become Orisha’s next king?

*Curse the skies.* I pause for a moment, gripping the smooth alabaster railing. Today was to be my victory.

Then that silver-eyed wretch got in the way.

The diviner’s face flashes behind my eyes for the tenth time since I watched her fly over Lagose’s gate. The image of her obsidian skin and long white hair stains. Impossible to blink away.

“Captain.”

I ignore the salute of the front guards as I enter the main hall. The title feels like a taunt. A proper captain would’ve sent an arrow through that fugitive’s heart.

“Where’s the prince?” A shrill voice echoes against the palace

walls.

*Dammit.* This is the last thing I need.

Mother pushes toward the castle entrance, gele tilting as she fights through the guards blocking her path. “Where *is* he?” she cries. “Where is—Inan?”

Mother’s face softens with relief. Tears spring to her eyes. She leans in close, pressing a hand against the cut on my cheek.

“There were reports of assassins.”

I pull away from Mother and shake my head. Assassins would’ve had clearer targets. They’d be easier to track. The fugitive was just one runaway. One I couldn’t catch.

But Mother does not care about the attackers’ true identity. Of my failure. Of wasted time. She wrings her hands together, fighting back more tears.

“Inan, we must . . .” Her voice trails off. It’s only then that she realizes everyone is staring. She straightens her gele and steps back. I can almost see the claws extending from her hands.

“A maggot attacked our city,” she snaps at the assembled crowd. “Do you not have places to be? Go to the market, flush out the slums. Make sure this never happens again!”

Soldiers, nobles, and servants clear the hall at once, tripping over one another in their haste. When they’re gone, Mother grabs my wrist and yanks me toward the throne room doors.

“No.” I’m not prepared for Father’s wrath. “I don’t have any news—”

“And you never will again.”

Mother throws open the large wooden doors and drags me across the tiled floors.

“Leave the room!” she barks. Like mice, the guards and fan-ners scatter.

The only soul brave enough to defy Mother is Kaea. She looks unusually handsome in the black chest plate of her new uniform.

*Admiral?* I stare at the decorated seal denoting her new rank. There's no mistaking it. She's moved up. *But what about Ebele?*

The harsh smell of spearmint stings my nose as we near the throne. I scan the tiles and sure enough, two distinct patches of fresh blood stain the cracks.

*Skies.*

Father's already in a mood.

"That includes you, *Admiral*," Mother hisses, folding her arms across her chest.

Kaea's face tightens; it always does when Mother addresses her with ice. Kaea glances at Father. He gives a reluctant nod.

"My apologies." Kaea bows to Mother, though there is no apology in her tone. Mother trails Kaea with a scowl until she exits the throne room doors.

"Look." Mother pulls me forward. "Look what the maggots did to your son. This is what happens when you send him to fight. This is what happens when he plays captain of the guard!"

"I had them cornered!" I yank my wrist out of Mother's hand. "Twice. It's not my fault my men broke position after the explosion."

"I am not saying it's your fault, my love." Mother tries to grab my cheek, but I slip away from her rose-scented hand. "Just that it's too dangerous for a prince."

"Mother, it's *because* I am a prince that I must do this," I press. "It's my responsibility to keep Orisha safe. I can't protect my people if I hide inside the palace walls."

Mother waves me away, shooing my words as she turns back

to Father. “He’s the next king of Orisha, for sky’s sake. Gamble with some peasant’s life!”

Father’s expression remains blank. As if he’s blocked Mother out. He stares out the window as she speaks, twisting the royal ruby that sits on his finger.

Beside him, his majacite blade stands tall in its golden stand, the snow leopanaire carved into its pommel gleaming with Father’s reflection. The black sword is like an extension of Father, never more than an arm’s length from his side.

“You said ‘they,’” Father finally says. “Who was the fugitive with? When she left the palace, she was alone.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet Father’s eyes as I step forward. “We don’t know her identity at the moment. We only know she isn’t native to Lagose.” *But I know she has eyes like the moon. I know the faded scar that nicks her eyebrow.*

Once again the diviner’s face floods my mind with such clarity it could be a painting hung on the palace wall. Her full lips part in a snarl; her muscles tense against her lean build.

Another prick of energy pulses under my skin. Sharp and burning, like liquor over an open wound. The searing throbs beneath my scalp. I shudder, forcing the vile sensation away.

“The royal physician is reviving the checkpoint guards,” I continue. “When they come to, I will have her identity and origin. I can still track them down—”

“You will do no such thing,” Mother says. “You could have died today! And then what? Leave Amari to take the throne?” She walks forward—fists clenched, headdress high. “You must stop this, Saran. Stop it this instant!”

I jerk my head back. She called Father by his name. . . .

Her voice echoes against the red walls of the throne room. A

harsh reminder of her gall.

We both look at Father. I can't fathom what he'll do. I begin to think Mother's actually won for once when he speaks.

"Leave."

Mother's eyes widen. The confidence she wore so proudly drips off her face like sweat. "My king—"

"Now," he orders, even in his tone. "I require a private word with my son."

Mother grabs my wrist. We both know how Father's private words usually end. But she can't interfere.

Not unless she wants to face Father's wrath herself.

Mother bows, stiff as a sword. She catches my gaze as she turns to leave. New tears streak the powder caked onto her cheeks.

For a long while Mother's departing footsteps are the only sounds to fill the vast throne room. Then the door slams shut.

Father and I are alone.

"Do you know the fugitive's identity?"

I hesitate—a white lie could save me from a brutal beating. But Father sniffs out lies like hyenaires on the hunt.

A lie will only make it worse.

"No," I answer. "But we'll get a lead by sunset. When we do, I'll take my team—"

"Call off your men."

I tense. He won't even give me a chance.

Father doesn't think I can do it. He's going to take me off the guard.

"Father," I say slowly. "Please. I didn't anticipate the fugitive's resources before, but I'm prepared now. Grant me a chance to make this right."

Father rises from his throne. Slow and deliberate. Though his face is calm, I've seen firsthand the rage that can hide behind his empty gaze.

I drop my eyes to the floor as he approaches. I can already hear the coming shouts. *Duty before self.*

Orisha before me.

I failed him today. Him, and my kingdom. I let a diviner wreak havoc on all of Lagose. Of course he's going to punish me.

I lower my head and hold my breath. I wonder how badly this will hurt. If Father doesn't ask me to remove my armor, he'll go for my face.

More bruises for the world to see.

He raises his hand and I shut my eyes. I brace for the blow. But instead of his fist against my cheek, I feel his palm grip my shoulder.

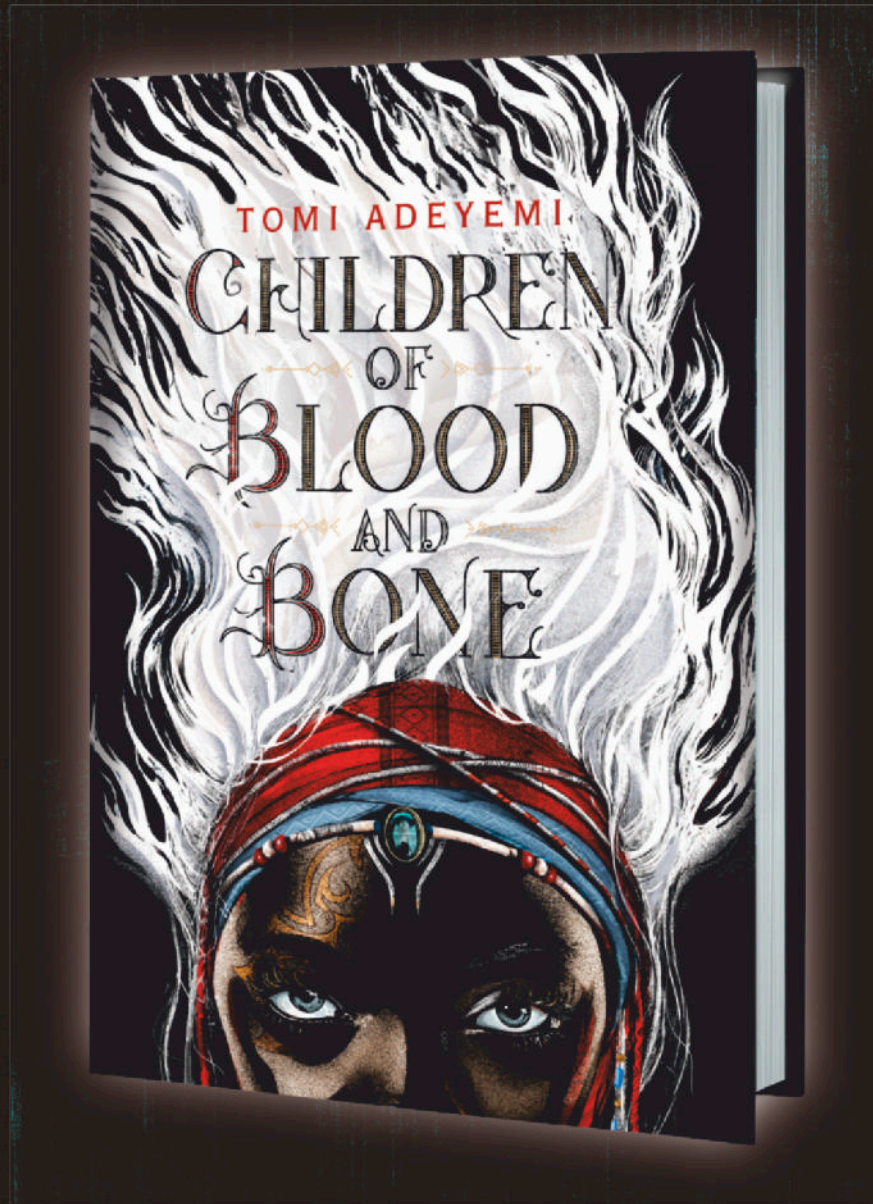
"I know you can do this, Inan. But it can only be you."

I blink in confusion. Father's never looked at me this way before.

"It's not just any fugitive," he says through his teeth. "It's Amari."



To read more, **WISH** for  
CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE  
on NetGalley!



Learn more and join the conversation!

[CHILDRENOFBLOODANDBONE.COM](http://CHILDRENOFBLOODANDBONE.COM)

#childrenofbloodandbone