

ONE OF TWO SIDES  
FIRST DRAFT

## PROLOGUE

There were two unhealthy clash of sounds resonating in the air. One from quick footsteps meeting dry ground and another from the grueling screams of mothers and newborns the footsteps left behind. The footsteps belonged to a man with ragged breath and sweating palms which held a basket with an unlocked lock. The tightly woven basket bounced, and so did the man long white beard - far from the white he truly knew. The dumpling folds around his waist, belonging to his knee length wrapper collecting thin Krameria Greys, flooded a small portion of sand resembling the color of the hair on his sweaty bare chest. His wrinkled eyes were wide and roamed the area towards which he ran, filled with trees, bushes and little squirrels. A sudden wind blew the trees making their leaves dance and his beard move. The man hurried to a branch detached from its parent, jumped over it with agility his age shouldn't have had and continued his journey. The screams were faint now, barely audible to the ears but the man could hear the noises still- Booming and saddening. He had an important quest, to deliver the content in the basket before the screams belong to him. He surely would not live with himself, even in the afterlife if the basket was slain.

Passing a sign post to which "BREAST" was carved in, probably with a stone and by an armature, seeing as the edges were roughly handled, he could see just ahead his destination. The moving Tarvan Carriage, not that it was moving at that moment- it was parked in a clearing, having wheels of five and windows of ten. The clouds were beginning to dim and the sky turning green. The man knew what he ran from was getting closer.

Inside the Tarvan Carriage was quiet and meters away was not calm. It was quiet because it had to be, not because they were afraid of what might come but because the Intercessor was having her tea. The intercessor was sipping on a steamy hot green liquid and sat on a couch, her legs folded - one over the other. Right behind her was her guard, Tortoise, poised as a stick and eyes never blinking. He did not shake even when two flies mated on his nose. And on the other end, where the door stood, her pet Griffin, Rororo, laid watching. His eyes were eerie looking, split-reddish gaze fixed on the two flies on Tortoise's nose. Rororo gulped and swallowed a spittle down his hairy throat. The intercessor drank the last of her tea and yawned, dropping the cup with a clank on its dish.

The air was lighter now. Rororo hopped at once, curling his tongue around the flies and swallowed them whole. Tortoise shirked and the Intercessor gave a hearty laugh.

When an urgent knock came, Tortoise jumped at once towards the door, wanting to get away from his master's pet. It seemed like no expected what they saw, because Tortoise had set a pose to attack.

The man stepped backwards watching Tortoise glare down at him, with a hand placed on his sword in his waist sash. It seemed like he would draw it anytime with the way the Ida blade started to blind his eyes.

"Spirit witch," Tortoise flared. "I dare you to take a step - your tongue will flag off our journey."

The intercessor came forward, sizing the man with many blinks. When her eyes capture the basket he held, she went pale. "The kings treasure," she said with an airy voice. "What brings you here, spirit witch."

"My lady, the great Mami-Wata of the Breast," the man began, his voice indicating his urgency. "I am nothing but a mere servant of the late king. Although weak, but forever wise - I was sent to guard the kings treasure but my abilities fail me."

"Why must I protect it?" she asked.

"You mustn't. Just sent it someplace else, somewhere Fanan will not dare enter." The man did not look at the Intercessor when he spoke the word but at the basket. "The treasure has a quest it must fulfill." The man said his last sentence under his breath.

The intercessor nodded towards Tortoise, sending him back inside, not before giving him a sneer. She walked forward into the light shining from a lantern just above her head. She held out her palms and the man took it as a signal to give her the basket. She opened the flaps and looked inside. She smiled. "I have seen many impossible things," she said. "I have see unnatural wars, witness the mates of two species but never something from two bloods. A child born from creation."

"Do not look with keen eyes. It is nothing but an object."

The intercessor looked up with sad eyes. "An amour of justice," she said running her hands inside the basket. "It will look for..."

"Do what you do best intercessor. I will take care of the rest."

"Not when you're dead," she raised her voice. The intercessor stared into space for a moment. Her eyes glazed over, watching and listening. "They are closer than you think." Her voice was softer this time.

He took a step towards her and she took a step towards him. He could see now the clarity of her eyes, they were like that of a fish - her retinas had both rod cells and cone cells. "Daalu never told me you resembled a fish."

"I take it as she was the one who told you about me," she told him. "I'm quite difficult to find, only if you possess the star."

The man regarded her for a long time. "You should be on your way now," he said, turning his back on her. "This world is not for people like it yet."

"You say that but then it will be back to fulfill its fate."

"Till then, intercessor. Till then."

"Ijeoma. Goodbye stranger."

As the man started for opposite direction, he heard a yelp and the rickety noises of wheels meeting little rocks. It was done, he had successfully kept the Kings treasure safe. He dared not to look back, it was better not to know where it went.

It was beginning to get warm. Heavy beads of sweat began falling down his face, to drip on the ground. His legs were beginning to weaken, making him grip the closest tree to keep himself steady. He felt a force fulling him further to the ground but he keep an iron grip on the tree.

A shadow emerged from behind him and immediately he felt the eerie presence, making him throw himself to the ground. Tall, buff figure covered all round in flaming iron and sickening devilish horns decorated his helmet. The Axe he held became visible, when he started towards the man's quivering figure. The Axe seemed to change in form; red liquid passed through lines on the weapon, into a circle and it was absorbed into his suit. The man's breath hitched; the Axe wasn't changing form, he was watching the process of creating another.

The man scrambled away on all fours, and pulled himself up, not minding his weak legs. "I know what you want," he said. "Curse my darned soul if I let you have it." The man set his hands in front of him, and placed his left foot behind him, ready for battle. Thunder clapped, and a heavy downpour began.

The second Axe had formed in its left hand, it was longer than the other -nothing he had ever seen before. No, he had seen wrong. It was nothing like an Axe, it was a cross of many spikes, and each spike was sharp and possessed great power. The cross was jambed on the ground, releasing great light from the sky. The surface rocked, making him trip on his own foot but not enough to pull him down. It indeed was something he had never seen before.

"I see you have many tricks up your sleeves," the man grunted. "How long will it last." At that, the man attacked with a yell, slamming the side of his hands on other's amour. His hands trembled from the attack, or perhaps it was his bones resetting having failed to make even a tiny dent. The man though, life was no longer meaningful, but it didn't mean he was going to go down without a fight- even against a seven footed beast he knew he would never best.

His opponent's Axe swiped upwards, coming down swiftly to where he stood. The man met it with a clap. When they met, he could tell the Axe was nothing made out of metal nor steel, just like a mist- hard dark mist. Quickly, the man checked the others legs with his foot, then another and another. Again and again, they went in circles, until nature came over him, making him step a little bit too late, and a swipe came down on the side of his face. The pain was intense, so all-consuming. It escalated from a dull throb to burning, glaring pain, that his vision blurred and his mouth let out a hearty scream.

"Where is it?" his opponent questioned. The man almost did not hear the other's voice because of the violent ringing in his ears. But he did, how could he not, it was like two swords grinding on the wheels of a carriage. And it came out menacing. "Give it to me!"

"Over my dead body, down-dweller." The man found what was left of his strength, which he knew was barley enough to keep him alive to the next minute. He staggered, looking around warily for something he could use but the grounds were empty, just green grasses decorated where he stood.

When he looked up again, the down-dweller was already a second away, swiping his cross and Axe across his chest. His scream echoed this time, and he shirked falling on his knees. Blood pooled from his tattered clothes, and he watched his nipples fall out of place. "LONG LIVE KING EMEKA!" he cried, knowing his life was already over.

This time, when the Axe came down, it swiped across his neck.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

Thirteen years have passed, suckling babies have grown and the war has come to an end. Divisions were also created, all in the land of the Ebos.

## CHAPTER TWO

If I were not so much of a coward, I would have dived head first into the sea of flies buzzing around on the Eke Market day and get to the end without a drip of sweat. I would have swiped my pockets full without so much of an effort, and sell the merchandise for baskets of white cowries.

I couldn't, but I will, not because I melted the state of cowardice from my skin. I had to get to the other end to meet up with the rest.

The sun was hot and bright, showing visibly the contours of the market of bones. The market inflated at this time of the day, shop owners flagging open their rickety shops, shoppers with tightly woven baskets avoiding the mud puddles as they went to different straw made stores which are past their demolition dates to buy. There were also peddlers pushing their wooden carts with Racks of shinning jewelries - glittering earrings, porch necklaces, Eye catching Antiques and blinding mirrors (many really bought those). Everyone in Tails knew Jeweleries like those didn't belong to us, and you could see these peddlers cajoling themselves to the closest store in case a guard passed by, and they did when no one expected. Basically, the market was crowded and I hated it. Crossing to the other end, I would have to avoid this many people and the last thing anyone would want is doing that when the sun scorched many backs. Although it was early in the morning, I could already smell the stink of bodies and breath enough to make the devil nauseous.

The buzzing deflated at mid-noon and some began closing up for the day, getting ready to either go home after a wholesome sale or attend the event at the Canal. It was then a good number of guards, five to be precise passed by, rotating their poised batons effortlessly across their eyes, fingers, visiting each store in search of strangers and strange merchandise from Heads, smuggled actually. By then, the peddlers had successfully jammed their carts in stores, all except one who wasn't fast enough. My hands darted out, waving with the back of my hands at the little man with cold peeled lips, in worn out pants and jacket to hide and forget about his cart. He could not see me though, and was caught like a fattened chick. I looked away, and so did everyone.

Standing on a steady stone at the beginning of the market, I looked above many moving heads and saw more muddy puddles, and got a glimpse of the edges of the Canal for the first time. A smile stretched on my face for the first time that morning, knowing I would get a two packages when I arrive the Canal. I got down, and let myself move freely as the crowd thinned down.

The peddler was still in a heated argument with the guards, until one of them swiped his leg across the peddlers knees, making him fall with a thud. It when on for a minute, before her was cajoled away leaving his cart with many rats like me. It was easy for me to take what every I needed, despite the growing crowd around it. I took two shinning boxes and was already on my way when a blue jewelry caught my eye. It seemed like I had seen it before, and at the same time

it looked unfamiliar. With a shrug, I grabbed. My pockets were full by the time I bent over and walked away from the vicinity.

The dump oozed of rotten smells of leaves and dungs, and the sudden hot breeze made it all worse. Times like this, kinds of unimagined smells rose up because of the season until the declination came around, where the trees shiver and lost its children to ice. Unfortunately, no would see that even when the times come around because of the never changing green clouds. It's been like that ever since the division, and the answers to the end lies with the Transcendent. I knew I had left the vicinity of the market of bones when triangle, low houses rose around me, separate from each other by two meters - the city of Gap. Each of their roofs hung sideways, and their paints looked like green droppings from the mouth. In the night, it looked a whole lot better, the evening moon covering the sorry excuse of the roof. It reminded me of the times I had to walk the road to the next street just to attended classes. I had to stop it though, so did every other children at home when cowries were getting less; we had to continue with our warden's home teaching because it was mandatory to learn basic words. That was three years ago, before we had to fend for ourself like resulting to stealing. It was my kind of job now.

My thoughts wonder further way, to where I could hear someone singing. "Nwam, gbahara anyi me kwa ihe olu gi..." the voice sang and the rest of the song was faint, making me unable to decode its meaning. Even if I heard them, I would not understand. It had been like that since I arrived the orphanage. My father had given me away to a woman in white, and went his way where no one knew. Even a letter with a single drip of dry ink, laid none on any sheet and a visit seemed like a far fetched dream. I haven't heard from him, not one day since I arrived. Sometimes, I wished I could imagine his face and think of him as something other than the person I imagine; Slander, wicked and rough.

I was a ten when I realized he was not going to come back for me, nor the basket I held on to with high hopes. Sitting upfront everyday, I cradled the basket to my chest forever believing I wasn't left to a warden who barely remembered my name.

I stepped into a puddle, splashing dots of muddy water at the front of my tunic, leaving a invisible stain. Glad I hadn't worn the white, brown was always good for an outing. I got to dark area at the foot of the mountain, and walked though a pathway by my left, coming up in front of the Canal. It was really not what I expected, not that my expectations were anything grand, it just did not venture to an empty surrounding. I expected guards with rifles and batons, covered up in amours and helmet, instead on empty air with no protection. It almost looked like no one expected the Transcendent to escape their grip.

I felt a drip, then another until I heard water overflowing. I glanced around, trying to locate the source, and I did see it. A overflow of dark blood through a pipe, pouring out with the power of a heavy water current and splashing all over. It almost got to me, jumping away was how I avoided being blood stained. The mud stain was decoration enough. From the throat scrapping cries, I knew the blood belonged to no human. I heard of how gruesome the Canal was, but I never was of age to go see for myself. The Canal was like a death bed, not for people like me, but for the Transcendent who looked like me and like anyone in the Tails - it was what I heard.

In exaggerated gestures, some described them as evil souls, some as malevolent beings and others nothing, because they were afraid to speak, in hopes of not attracting one to possess them or their children. But there were none who adored them, all were afraid, even before the division.

I tore my gaze from the still flowing tap of blood, and looked at the Rula, the black gash which separated the Ebos into three parts; Head, Body and Tails. No one has dared to cross the Rula, not since the war ended seventeen years ago. So, I could not imagine what lied beyond, all I knew was that it was safer for us in Tails.

I snorted, at my own thought, no human was safe as long as the Transcendent lived, but it brought little comfort to the people knowing King Ifeanyi will add an extra head to the dump, when something not human dared enter Tails. It was why the Canal was built, ten feet circular arena with a single opening, well two openings, but no one dared to pass the other for it was where led to the Rula boarder, I could see from where I stood a bit of the connection. Looking at the wall made me remember how it brought me little comfort guessing my parents were terminated beyond the boarders, but I knew my brain would never allow me to believe it.

“Nkiti!” Stop it, I told my self firmly. Don’t think about the past, remain in the present. I had to focus on how I was going to live.

Hanye always taught me to say those words when I thought of bad things. Now, the thought of him made me visibly eat out the corners of the Canel.

The tiniest air blown in my ear, made me fall forward, almost landing on the pudding of blood. A hand, held me tightly preventing an embarrassing landing.

“What are you thinking about?” a voice asked, fanning the tip of my ear with a very hot breath. Thinking it was who I thought it was because of the light nature of the voice, I turned with a smile, instead I saw an unfamiliar beaming face. I pulled my hand away quickly from his, stepping backwards, I fell into a cold soft mushy surface. It ended up belonging to a rather fatter boy.

“Scared, burna girl?” The fatter boy chuckled, shaking my shoulders. “Rigid stick.”

“Or should I say, Hanye’s burna girl,” the other boy cooed, crossing his thin arms across his torso.

The two boys wore a similar grin, their hair dark and curly, their pupils, dark as midnight. They bore a striking resemblance to each other, it wouldn’t take a suit sayer to tell they were twins. They were thieves like me, their pockets were bulging, the fatter one had gold necklaces spilling just halfway down his knees.

“Hapu m aka. Please, leave me alone,” I said timidly. I was uncomfortable, with moments like this, feeling insecure under the eyes of people I didn’t know. My heart pounded with the strangers covering up my breathing space. I felt like a needle under their scrutinizing gaze.

“And why would we do that?” the fatter one rubbed my woolen hair rather harshly.

“Look, Udo. She is begging for us to leave her alone,” the slimmer one said, regarding the fatter boy whose name was apparently Udo.

Another pressure pressed against my back, but this time on my waist making me spin and on instinct I set myself to run before it got worse. I grabbed the strong arms and pushed it aside with



gritted teeth, so that I could get enough room. I was met with a barrel chest slapping across my face, there was something soft about it though. Before I made my escape, I was met with Hanye's confused face. I visibly relaxed.

"You thought I was a boy didn't you?" She laughed and I looked away. "I knew it, I trained these beauties well enough." Hanye kissed my each of her fingers and her bulging arms and I just stared. She must have noticed the tensed cloud surrounding her, because she stopped what she was doing to look at the three of us.

"We will wait for you both right over there," Udo said, pointing to the deserted entrance of the Canel. "Come on, Ife." And off they went.

Hanye broadly grinned until she caught my eye roll. She drew closer, standing a foot taller than me.

"What?"

"I don't think I like your new friends very much," I said dryly. "And I think, they don't like me as much as I don't like them."

"I met them a few minutes ago. They are not that bad."

"Oh really?"

Hanye nodded slowly. "Yes. Ife can be a pain in the butt sometimes, and Udo a jackass but then they are good conversationalists."

"I fail to see your point," I grumbled, but I was glad my best friend was by my side.

She shook her head and snatched the two boxes I had forgotten in my pockets.

Before I could protest, she was already walking off with long strides as she jiggled them, saying something about the boxes I couldn't comprehend. "Come on Kasie, we haven't gotten all day," she waved me without turning. It was the kind of person my friend, only friend was.

Hanye Ibu, the only orphan I knew with a second name. Her story was not painfully as sad as mine, but sad all the same. I watched Hanye wither away when I heard the story from her quivering lips, hair pulling and fingers banging on her tiny chest. That was then though, Hanye had grown a whole lot stronger dedicating her time to weights and muscle training, oblivious to me knowing the true purpose. Hanye's parents were Clam diggers before the division, wandering the sea for anything breathing into their trawls, and her older brother a mere trader of anything, selling whatever worth selling, he sold fishes, clams and his parents everyday catch. There was a time when, there was nothing to catch, making them till the soil and plant seeds in order to feed. Her brother sold whatever came out of those seeds too, even if they were weeds, he disguised them as edible produce. Then the Transcendents happened, and thousands of humans died including whoever she held dear to her. Hanye till this day, had not gotten over their demise and sometimes would forget to feed thinking of how to get back at them. I would have to force a spoon or two I into her mouth, to keep her living.

I walked over to the bunch, and got a slap on the back from Hanye. "Hey!" I yelped.

"Don't faint on me in there Sie," Hanye said, placing her heavy arm on my shoulders. "You remember the way we do it right? Take and get away." I nodded, looking straight at the opening

for what laid on the other side. Mixed feelings swelled within me, not know if I had to be excited or scared for what I was about to witness.

“As long as you’re with me, there is nothing to be afraid of.” I nodded my head.

“Oh really?” Udo mocked. Hanye regarded him a side glance for a while, and signaled for them to enter. The boys gave the OK, thumb-to index finger sign close to their cheeks and walked in.

A moment of silence passed. Hanye peeled her arms off my shoulder and came to stand in front of me. Involuntary, my face fell downward, counting the army of fire ants on their way to deep rich anthills one of my foot would get to.

“Look at me Sie,” she whispered, placing a hand to my chin, raising my face up to look at her bright brown eyes. “You know we are going to split up once inside.”

I shook my head slowly. “We can go in together.”

“It is not like every steal Sie.”

“But Han,” I grumbled, my heart tightening.

“This is the Canal, any mistake will make us shred into tiny pieces.” She laughed after a while, rubbing my cheeks with her palms. “Look, you stole two boxes, says a lot about what you can do without me,” she said, placing the boxes back in my pockets.

“That was only because it was accessible.

“Enwere ike inweta ihe obula. Anything is accessible.”

A group of men in all black strolled towards us and with the way their facial features were hardened, hair pressed against many rings reaching the sky, we had to step backwards for them to pass through. “Get out of the way!” one of them exclaimed, when an unsuspecting young man came up in front of them through the narrow passage. They went as far as pushing him violently to the side. Something made me believe they had not come for games. Well who came to play in the Canal anyways.

“What can I say to convince you Han?” I noticed soon after Hanye’s attention was long gone, staring into space at nothing, her joint eyebrows tangled in a mess. The grip she had on the sides of my cheeks was beginning to burn. I had to step away, rubbing them gently to reduce the tight grip, I was sure had left a mark. “Han?” I called. “Are you okay?” I had to snap my fingers in front of her, to get her to come back.

“What!”

“You were gone for a while,” I said worriedly.

She waved it off. “It’s nothing. Let get going before the others begin to worry.” It must have been obvious I was reluctant to move with her and was able to plead with her one more time because she said. “I’ll be close by.”

Thick shadows surrounded us through the passage, deepening the closer we walked to the end, brighting a bit because of the holes of light on the top. The spiral stairs leading to the top were steep and difficult to climb, only for me I guessed. Hanye jumped on them with little or no effort and waited for me at the end.

“Now I know where all the guards went,” I told no one in particular, staring at the guards surrounding each and every corner of the Canal with their Ida blades resting in their palms. One could tell the difference between them and guards at the market, other than the dissimilarities weapon wise. These one lined their cheeks with black horizontal marks and wore skirts above their knees, showing their uneven toned knees from days on end basking in the sun. Their skirts although unappealing, enables them move freely when attacking a predator, so I heard. “And I thought the market was crowded.”

There were whoppings from thousands of people in the Canal, some standing and others sitting, but all where clapping staring down at the empty stage. It was like they were awaiting someone to come or the someone had just left. Men were sharing cups of palm wine a woman poured from a dusty looking calabash. The woman poured the translucent liquid with skill meeting gently with the coconut cups, a single drop not spilling. To my right, two children were playing Ten-ten, slapping their alternating foots together simultaneously as they clapped their hands, all done in a fast rhythm. A little boy farther down ran towards them to join in the game. The men in all black smoked a stick to my left, chatting amongst themselves. It was unlike was anyone truly expected the Canal to be. I could see from the Han’s wide open eyes, she hadn’t expected a place of death to look like a place of life. Tat was Tails for you, happy to turn the death bed of a transcendent to a celebratory arena.

It was getting a bit colder, a complete contrast to the warm weather outside. The hairs on my skin rose up, not because of the cold, a transcendent was being lad to the stage by two guards I hadn’t noticed. She was wrapped round in chains across her torso, and her hands neatly shackled in more chains behind her back. I could see her face clearly from when I stood, she was bright smooth skinned, her hair was straight, falling down to her foot and her eye whites brighter than ours which bore a rather reddish shade. She looked a little above sixteen, slightly younger sthan my age, wearing a long wrapper across her her chest. One of the guards pushed her prompting a great fall to which she scrapped her knees on the rough surface of the stage.

The Canal was quiet and the watchers were distracted, making it easier to take whatever we wanted. Hanye pulled me away from the edge of the seats, into a small shack where the woman who poured the palm wine dropped her calabash in a hurry to see the action on stage. Udo and Ife were already there emptying the contents in their pockets into a sack to “create more roam for goods,” as they called it. I placed my boxes into the them too before we went our separate ways, with Hanye with me of course.

“We take the man with the red porch,” Hanye said, pointing to a man chewing on a shaved branch. I looked at him and the man beside him, not noticing any red porch or bag I could steal.

“I see no red porch.”

She rolled her eyes and signaled for me to go with her. “At times like this, you must really look at observe and connect the dots.”

“I can connect the dots.”

“Not as well as I do,” I shoot at her. It was when we got closer, I noticed the red porch knotted to the man’s arm, three red porches actually, the second on in his pocket and the last one

he held in his palms. It was obvious getting to the one he held was going to be difficult but it did nothing to stop me as long as Hanye was close by. Stealing to us was like a grain, something required for us to survive in this wreck of a city. Honestly, I wouldn't do it if I had a choice, everything has carved us to the kind of situation.

We took the red porches, Hanye skillfully distracting the man, for me to take the one he held, and many more. By the time we were done, our pockets bulged with cowries and our shoes felt uncomfortable from the tchotchke's under.

The ringing of a bell brought my attention back to the happenings on stage. Somehow, the female transcendent had gotten to the ground on her knees, her back bent over a wooden platform and her clothes torn from her body leaving her stark naked in front of the crowd. Her scarcely pink tongue was drawn out and a nail was passed through it, I wonder why I didn't hear a cry.

"I heard what they do to them is unimaginable."

"I bet you will want to see that."

"Anything that brings anguish and shame to the transcendent is worth seeing," she began. "They deserve every bit of pain, and more." Hanye's fists tightened, veins popping visibly in her wrist. The men in all black threw their smoking sticks at the girl, surprising me with their accurate aim when it hit her squarely on the face.

"Umunwanyi na nwoke ana m ekele unu n'ime kanaal," the announcer drawls excitedly throwing his hands fluidly in the air. "I introduce your favorite show of the year. Watch and enjoy."

The announcers last words were followed by cheers and roars from the crowd. The girls once bright face turned pale, and her eyes leaked liquid I forever knew as salty tears. I could bet my life the girl hadn't done anything wrong, life just knew how to place living creatures in uncomfortable conditions. Someone could have stopped what ever was about to happen, but everyone wanted to see every Transcendent born to the ground, so did Hanye who was cheering alongside the crowd. "Kill her, roast her, and tear her apart," they echoed in different rhythms, almost resembling a song. The one mistake I made was look at her eyes, because they were looking straight at me. They spoke words of sadness and a little bit of plea? It was like she wanted me to save her.

I frowned. "What do you think the girl is thinking about?"

"How her people never should have stepped beyond their boundaries," she scoffed settling on me a look of unbelievability, like she expected me to have know the answer.

The bell rang again and the butcher stepped out. He was wearing a skin mask over his face making it difficult to recognize who he was. The crowds drew closers, Hanye and the others found some empty seats, all eager to watch.

The butcher took out a knife, placing it above his head, saying the words. "All Transcendent must die."

The last thing I saw and heard before I walked out, unable to watch was the unearthly scream coming out of her lips when her ribs were severed from her spine. It was a bloodbath.

### CHAPTER THREE

Mornings came with ear-splitting cock crows and graceful rising of everyone in Tails to start off their daily tilling of soils and munching on anything edible. I started out early too.

Nwam, gbahara anyi me kwa ihe olu gi, la la la and a bit of more la's.

I still could not hear the final words of the song without beat even though I strained myself to listen, and still could not decode the meanings of the one's I heard. I dipped my reed pen into wet ink, trying all the Nsibidi letters I was taught. I dragged the pen from the left side on the bamboo leave on the table, to form a line and drew another across it. Then giving a little space less than two inches, I made a curve and another giving me the first words I learned, 'LOVE'. After which, I wrote more letters but none of them gave me the words I needed to know. Why couldn't I get it right? In utter frustration, I crumpled the leaves in my palms throwing it across the room, landing silently on the walls and to the ground, where multiple scrunches of leaves laid. The light was dim yet enough for me to make out the obvious mess made from multiple numbers of other paper leaves littering. With a sigh, I slammed my pen a little too hard in the ink, causing a splutter of dark goo drop unevenly on my desk.

"I wonder what it means," I said in exasperation. Silently, I wished I could ask someone or anything for the meaning but as it could be something only meant for me to know, I couldn't take the risk.

Peeling my butt from the mat, a round shaped stone fell out of one of my pockets. It was the ornamental I had gotten from the cart yesterday. Picking it, I became aware of the sound of a knock and the wheezing sound of my bedroom door. Tossing the ornamental back into my pockets, afraid of getting caught with a stolen item, I sat on my bed with hast and pretended I was braiding my hair.

"Kamise, kamsie sie," a whisper echoed in the hallway like breezy air floating by. I halted my action and stretched my neck to get a glimpse of whoever was behind the door.

"Warden?"

"I know what you did yesterday. I followed you like how the sun follows the wind, or the wind follows the sun or something like that," the voice said exaggerating.

"I know it's you Hanye." I clucked my tongue. "Only you would say the sun follows the wind."

Hanye cracked up, laughing hand to chest and the other banging the door fully open; revealing herself to a very unamused me. I lifted an eyebrow unable to fathom the reason for her exaggerated giggles.

"I got you real good, didn't I?"

"Yes. Yes, you got me real good," I said dryly. "I can almost taste it."

Still in a fit full of giggles, Hanye crossed the room, over to the crumpled leaves. She picked one up and her laugh lines slowly melted away. "Rough morning?"

I shrugged. "Rough being an understatement here." I sighed, slumping on my bed. "Nothings coming to me."

"I suggest you ask Warden Chineyre. The quicker the better, right?" Han opened up the leave she held, reading from it the sorry excuse of an attempt to find meanings. "Love, hate, anguish, parasite?" she finished up lifting her eyes to watch me.

"It's possible."

"The letters..."

"The letters," I said mimicking her questioning and inquisitive voice, slightly dragging the 's' in letters. A twinge of remorse gripped my heart, knowing she was only trying to help but I couldn't help myself feel annoyed. "Gone over them more than I would like to. Look, nothings working's alright. The warden hates me, you know that. Nothing will make me ask for her help for something so, so..."

"Personal," Hanye finished, presenting herself as someone who truly knew me. Unexpectedly, Han threw the leaves at me, attacking me almost immediately with a yell of attack. We tumbled to the floor, I in shock and she with an amusing grin. She slightly touched my sides, moving them roughly on my skin until I was left in a fit of laughter, gasping for breath. "So, the boys want to meet by twilight, are you coming?," she questioned. "I can always bring your share to you if you want."

I was unable to answer immediately, my breath sounding like a dying goat. Han really knew how to change the mood when it became tense, that was the kind of friend I had. It was after a minute I was able to respond. "Of course I will come." I said.

"Come find us at Alu."

"You told them about our place?"

Hanye bit her lips. "They can be trusted. Trust me."

"You never told me where you met them by the way."

She waved an airy hand. "Market of bones."

"I was at the market of bones too." Hanye had left earlier for reasons I couldn't remember, we agreed to meet on the other side the time we did. "How come we didn't cross?"

"Yeah. I wonder the same." A crash sounded outside the door. We winced, but Han did twice because I pushed her off me with both my hands. "That was painful Sie," she complained. I ignored her going over to gather my littering leaves into a paper bag. "What do you think about Udo?"

I stopped, mentally going over the boys features trying to put a face to the name. "The slimmer one?"

"No Sie. You have to be more observant." Then it must have been the fatter one. Another crash, which sounded more like the fall of an Udu on Ishaka. "He told me what he knew about the Transcendent." Hanye went on telling me about the information she got; their sly way of disguising as humans in order to infiltrate Tails. "He said, you wouldn't even tell them apart from ourselves. They have magic Sie."

"Tells us how much stronger they are from us." I paused, looking outside the window at some orphans running in circles in a chase. "You aren't thinking of going after them, are you?"

“Of course not. Was only curious, that’s all.” Something told me, there was more to it than mere curiosity. The girl hated them more than the village Pusu hated the Oke, and more than the hatred I had for my father. “I also found out the only way they can be decapitated is their tongue. Once their tongues are out or cut off, they are nothing.” Her words took me back to the Canal, how the girls tongue was nailed down, I had wondered why. Now I knew.

“What if there are good ones amongst the bad?”

Han had to laugh at my absurd question. “Impossible. There is never good in bad.” Han observed me for a second or two. “Is this about the Canal girl?”

“No?”

“I saw the way you looked at her Kamsie. The girl I mean. They are evildoers, we don’t know who she killed or what she did before she was caught.”

Then, someone knocked lightly and my door was pushed open. It was Toby, one of the orphans. Cradled in his arms were a dozen Ishaka’s, too many for a 4 foot boy to carry and too heavy for his scrawny body. He straightened his back, regarding me with a smile.

“Isn’t that a bit too much?” Hanye said, voicing my thoughts. I let my paper bag fall, almost going over to the boy to let off the weight.

“It’s okay,” he said immediately. “I have to get this down for the assembly tonight.” The assembly was a kind of event held anytime a an orphan was either leaving to his new parents or someone passed their age was leaving to go battle the harsh world outside. Knowing it was a few months before Han and I turned eighteen, I was relieved knowing it could never could be either of us. I wouldn’t know what it would be like staying away from Han, I was sure the goring pain I felt when I realized my father was never going to come for me would be similar to what I’d feel when she left; if not worse.

“What is it Toby?”

“The warden wants you,” he said.

“Why?”

The boy shrugged. “Don’t know. I was instructed to get you, thats all.”

“Han...” I began.

“See you later Sie.” Hanye tried to snuggle her laugh, walking to where the boy was. She helped the boy with some of the Ishakas, and they left through the door leaving me with my thoughts. The day obviously was not going to be in my favor.

Slapping on vegan leather fitted the molds of my feet. I took some time to visually ensure my room was neat as it ought to have been. Cracked walls looking like spiral designs made the room have a kind of archaic pleasure. But I knew too well it was only a matter of time before it caved in, along with the other parts of the house. My talent was everywhere too; notes from sound I enjoyed, wrote and learned, but there was no one I created. From the walls, shelves and bamboo desks, sheets of leaves were pasted with pins and animal fat to ensure it wouldn’t join the wind and fly off somewhere.

Beside my desk, glued to the side, the basket I had arrived in sat. You could mistake it for a kind of animal, small, brown and fat. The sides are smooth, covered in soft Carmel skin, the top

just the same bearing a set of dark eyes resembling beads but if you were to look closer, one would notice they were just painted seedlings which could not sprout. To remind myself I was once in it, I pasted a note on its front, 'Kamise's baby basket'. Not in a bad way though, it was just sometimes I would curl myself and watch it wondering what went through my father's mind when he gave me away - sad, happy or neither.

Our hallway was not much of a space to look at. Usually, it would be empty and cold, the children either off to do some illegal job or learning under the Warden. It was for the younger ones though. And it was, empty and cold, my breath could be heard.

Frames of past orphans, as well as the current ones stood on the walls, and they were just two. The orphanage had only seen two generations since it opened, it wasn't so much of a popular place. The photo I was in was drawn, so did the other one. I remember how long we stood in a position for hours I couldn't remember because I had stopped counting when the sounds of growling tummy's became unbearable. We were told, if a person moved, the artist would have to start all over. And trust me, no one wanted that. My legs froze over in the cold, and my lungs felt as if it was going to give out.

The Warden's office was almost at the entrance of the building. I only had to pass a few rooms to get to the gates, finally reaching my destination. Her door was left ajar, prompting me to slip in through the open space, entering. There are windows sending enough sunlight into the room, and enough to see the menacing cat measuring me with her vertical silts. Bingo, the Wardens dog was a hideous creature, an eye gone and so was her left ear, shaved all off with her fur leaving her looking like my crumpled leaves. It's black skin matched with the dark furniture and her eyes, the sandy soils. It hissed. It hated me and I knew the reason why, kind of. The first time I'd seen her, I was swelled with fear and shock making me dump my hot cassava meal all over her skin. Lets just say, I was the reason she looked like a lump under a shoe. The Warden hated me too because I skinned her precious pet. She helped save her, cutting off her bad spots.

I glued myself to the couch when I heard footsteps approaching. The door opened with a thump. It was the Warden, her arms filled with papers leaves and behind her two orphans, Chukwudi and Obinna. They paid me no attention, going over to the desk. I saw the content papers when she put them down, lines and shapes drawn with reed pens and ink. They harbored letters belonging to the children from her lessons.

"Tell the children the assembly begins at candle burn," she said. The children nodded. "You may leave."

Side by side, the children scrambled out with the other, none of them paid attention to the girl sitting uncomfortable on the couch watching Bingo prowl like a lion around me.

"You wanted to see me Warden Chineyre?" I said, and I was ignored again. I didn't call her straight out by her title because we had been warned not to do so. Titles were just titles, she told us, they were recognitions but you can't tell a warden from another if you didn't use their names alongside it. Hanye found reason with it somehow. I disagree, she wanted to fill up her huge ego spilling to even a mere stranger she was of greater status. Everyone in Tails was of low grade, she had to get over herself. "Warden Chineyre?"



“Where were you and Hanye yesterday?” she finally responded, straightening her crouched figure with a huff. She was dressed in her usual uniform; bogus Akwete dress and a circular handmade red beads sewn to her wrist. “I heard from the other children you went out.”

“Uh.. We went to see some friends,” I said lying through my nostrils. Bingo hissed and his owner grinned. We could get in trouble if we were to be found guilty of theft. “Why are you asking?”

Her grin disappeared, replaced with a smug smile, almost mocking. “I have good news. Well more of a good news to me.”

“What news?”

She sat down on her desk, drawing out a leave under the jungle of the pile she had brought in. This one was neatly folded in equal squares. Bingo went to her, climbing into her lap and snuggled into it, nesting her head in between her thighs. The Warden held it out for me to take and I plucked it, cautiously. I hesitated for a while, trying to comprehend the ominous situation of a letter being given to me.

“Go on, open it.”

No matter how long I stared at it, It was nonsense, at least to me. The words bore a striking resemblance to the Nsibidi letters I knew but they were not- this was complicated. There made of waves and squiggly lines, I thought I saw an arrow shot in front of the cross shaped love. I lowered the leaves. “I don’t understand what these letters mean.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” the Warden mocked, taking the letter away from her. “It’s higher Nsibidi.”

“Why did you give it to me?” I asked.

The Warden dropped it back on the table. “Let’s just say, someone is getting out of here soon.” She stood, carefully stroking her cat on her bare back. Her steps were fluid and graceful, if she weren’t so nasty I was sure she would have gotten a husband instead of a cat.

I bit my lips in anticipation. “What do you mean, Warden?”

“It’s Warden Chineyre to you, young killer.” I guess she still remembered what I did to her cat. Up front, I noticed her nose flared and her eyes were put in slits like her cats. I flickered my eyes, unable to keep a steady gaze.

“Is this about what I did to Bingo?” I said. “I told you, it was a mistake. Hanye can attest to that.”

She kept approaching, and I moved backwards with each step until I could no more, falling back on the couch I once sat on. Her face was pushed into mine, her hot breath fanning my face. The space left between us was slim, and there was nothing more I could do than to marry my back, deeper into the chair.

“Dear Kamsie, someone wants you.”

“I don’t understand.”

Her expression went blank, like cleaned up spoon with no speck of food stain. “You are getting adopted.” Lucky, she stood back up finally letting the air back into my lungs.

“Is that a joke?” I sat upright with determination. “I have a few months left, why would I get adopted now. I can’t go, I won’t-”

“The laws are the laws Kamsie.”

I heard the nonchalantly in her tone and realized talking sense to the woman would do me no good. “How did someone adopt me when I met no families. I did not attend any of those sessions” I walked to her desk where she was now immersed in the paper leaves she brought it. Marking them either wrong or right. “You say the laws are the laws.”

“Kindly tell me what the laws of the orphanage are?”

“A family may choose from the children they see and could touch, a child most not be adopted when absent,” I read out the laws pasted on the wall. I was hesitant to read the last one knowing I had flaunted it so many times.

“All orphans must be present when a someone comes to adopt.”

“This isn’t fair.” I turned back to her. “I can’t leave Hanye, she’s like my sister.”

“Sisters leave each other too.”

“Not Hanye and .” The corners of my mouth trembling.

“It is settled,” the Warden said. “You leave first thing tomorrow morning.”

“You wanted to get back at me for your stupid cat, isn’t it?” I bit angrily. “It’s pathetic.”

“Watch the way you speak to me.” I dug my heels in and made my way to the door. “Oh and Kamsie, do attend the assembly tonight.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

There was this time where I had fallen into a cat trap when I went for a steal with Hanye. I was not happy about it; especially when it happened on a chilly afternoon; the word dreadful would not comprehend how I felt the moment my knees scrapped on the hard surface of the hole I entered. By the time I was pulled out, my fingerer's were nipped, and so were my toes, my knees wore a sickening gash, my heart pounding like canon drums.

That was how I felt at this moment. Like I had fallen back into the hole but this time, there was no one to pull me out of it. My heart boiled and wore a sickening gash, stunned by the news I received. I was hearing someone shout my name from afar, perhaps the person was closer than I thought and I think I was walking without a purpose.

Out of everything to have happened to me today, being adopted was not one of the events to have crossed my mind ever. All odds had been entirely in my favor but I guess it hadn't mattered. What would it be like to stay away from the people I knew, and stumble into a container of strange face, it would be like starting all over again. I was attached. The right word would be sewn, tied, glued and stapled to Hanye and the orphanage. Eventually, I knew someday I would have to leave but I'd have Hanye with me and the many cowries we had stolen in order to survive when we leave in a few months-we've planned it all out.

Someone was gripping my arm, Toby from earlier and I guess I was about palming my face to the wall. Murmuring rose around me, my name being the main subject of the jumble of words from the lips of many children. I was still in the hallway, and I see the children, about ten of them with Udu drums and Ogene's watching me with their innocent eyes now filled with worry. Then I became aware of my clenched fists Toby held, the droplets of liquid from my eyes, fell on my cheeks, to my neck and the wrenching headaches forming.

"Are you okay Kamsie?"

Not knowing weather to nod or shake my head, I looked away, prying my hands softly away from the light hold I said, "I'm okay." I wasn't going to do what the Warden said.

Outside was hot as always being one of the things that kept me sane. The other was the song I sang along with the woman in my head filling my insides with warmth and hope, lalaing the parts I didn't know.

Our home was on the edge of a hill barricaded with holes and sticks to keep animals out, but it had little or no effect seeing as goat dungs lined up the yard, and patches on the grasses was evidence it was eaten. Beside ours is another home, made of red mud and straws for roofs and windows like ours, crawling with group of shirtless farmers with hunched shoulders, lined palms from holding cutlasses and hoes, tilling the soil with beads of sweats running down their backs. Today, they sat in circles drinking from cups and spitting on their over grown crops. Other homes were several minutes away, windows shut and no form of noises rising from within.

I climbed the ladder down to the bottom of the hill, tightly knotted contraption up the hill we use in descending and ascending everyday. I could see people at the bottom waiting for me to land, so they'd climb up with their baskets of yams and cassava, continuing their daily chores. From my height, mountain of sand stood along with paved pathways with no life, only a spec of twister bits of sands.

I only had to pass a few houses to reach the village gates. Higher chain linked twin fences with its tip sharply pointed to the sky, with a guard stationed in front of it. In theory, the guards job was to let no one beyond the gates to keep us safe from the Transcendents - Kings orders. But since the guards always rotated their posts, giving me just enough time to slip though the openings and back when they rotate by midnight. I did what I'd always done and waited for him to leave with the soft glowing light from the sun when it went below the horizon and ran through the gates with speed. I opened the gates carefully, not to attract any unwanted attention and glued my back to the gates, sliding through smoothly. Beyond the gates was a small meadow, yellow flowers stuck to green stalks. I followed the green pathway, leading to the forest of trees, known as Ala. Outside the village was safer than anyone thought, peaceful and calm, I would know for the last five years I'd come. I believed the King over reacted because the Rula was still further away. Extending the village a little would give room for farmers to own greater lands and build better markets with no mud puddles.

As soon as I entered the forest of trees, I follow tide strings on branches. Hanye and I kept our steals in Ala outside the gates, tying strings in order to find our way back to our spot. We had the strings tucked into the holes to hide it from individuals who ventured into the forest too, but we made it in such a way we'd find it whenever we wanted to. I was 11 and Hanye was 12 when we found about our place, two curious children wanting to hide what we stole from the adults.

When I saw movements, I knew I was getting close. I knew I had every right to be mad at Hanye for telling two strangers about our place but she had told me to trust her, and I had no choice not to. But deep down I knew we could get into trouble with not only the Warden but with the king if they were to tell on us- death penalties, weepings of a hundred perhaps, what about death? Hanye told me to trust her, so I should.

The three of them sat in a circle over the spot we had our goods buried having a serious conversation over a burning fire. Their eyes watched something Udo raise in his bag and her eyes widened. Hanye said something about one of them cheating or something like that and an argument started but I wasn't particular about their loud voice which could attract wild dogs, lone wolves, bears venomous snakes, I was seething because of the rising smoke which could signal the guards that life was beyond the gates.

"What do you think you are doing?" I said to no one in particular matching their voices. The argument started dimmed. I went to the fire, stepping on it a number of times until all was left were ashes upon ashes.

"Sie," said Hanye, pushing me away from the spot. I eye the two boys behind watching me with curious gazes, probably thinking I had lost my marbles. Hanye's hands went to my forehead and he takes her hands away as quickly as possible. "You're sick."

“What’s going on Han?” I scold. “You of all people know the risks when fire is lit in the woods.”

“It’s not like we were caught, right Ife?” the fatter one, Udo said. The three of them tensed. His words seemed to have a second meaning other than what I knew he said.

“Or anything Udo,” Ife shrugged. “Jealousy doesn’t look good on you,” he finished, directing his last words to me.

“I’m not jealous.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Hanye told me coming to my face. “Your eyes are red. What did the Warden say?”

I step away quickly, going over to where they once sat. A stitch of colorful flowers circle a portion of the log, adding a kind a beauty to its dead dry surface. I let my fingers trace one of the flower which grew on the log, marveling on the silky feel of the petals. “She had me adopted. Some kind of a stupid revenge for what I did to Bingo.” I plucked the flower, knotting my fingers together I pressed it together.

In the sudden silence, there was chill because I felt our distance growing stronger, and I hadn’t even left yet. At the corner of my eye, I saw Hanye take something from the bag Udo held out earlier. She crossed a leg over the log so that we’d sit facing each other, holding it up a small horizontal plac laid in her hands- she placed it down making me see clearer its smooth edges. I took it in my hands, noticing from the nearly visible writing that it was some kind of ticket or a receipt of some sought for a ride. Following the writings, a small Carmel was drawn with large carriages stuck to its back.

I huffed. “What this for?” I asked. “Someone would think you all are thinking of running away.”

“Because we are. The first shipping leaves tonight, the second tomorrow at dawn, right Udo?” Ife said. Udo nodded his head, his expression brightening to his teeth. He tossed a berry up high and into his mouth. Hanye’s eyes were conversing with mine, as if to say it was the only way. I plucked myself off the log. I laughed at the ugliness of the situation.

“We could do it, you know.” Hanye said quietly. “All four of us.”

“Hanye.”

“Really think about it Sie. We could go over to Heads, gets goods we can sell like the peddlers. Would last us a life time. I would enough cowries to be one of the guards.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Hanye’s dream expect survival was to be a guard but one had to pay to get in, it was just the way things worked in Tail. I was unable to understand her reason at first until when she told me that it would help her take her revenge on the Transcendents. But the idea to go the Heads was like presenting ourselves for the hawks to feed off our flesh. It was too dangerous.

“By the time we’re back, we’d be passed the age for adoption,” she added quickly.

“It’s too dangerous,” I said.

“No if we go as a group?” she said.

“The answer is no Han. We might get killed,” I said irritated.”

“What do you want most in life?” Han snapped back. “I know you want to survive, we all do. But you want something, you want the answer to that darn song and to find your father. The opportunity is right in front of you Sie.”

“It seems you had it all planned out.”

The conversation felt acidic. She got me straight to the neck, alright. It got me good. Deep down I knew I’d be able to find who I was and ask my father straight to his face why he had left me. The two boys were watching me now with guarded eyes, they too must have something else they’d want to do except to provide for their survival. They’d be the type to want to get married, they were good looking I’d have to admit, strong enough to protect their family and provide for them through farming or sawing of woods.

“How are we going to get more tickets?” I asked. We could sell the goods we gathered and the cowries we stole, at least it could get us the tickets we need. I knew those things didn’t come cheap.

“I know what you’re thinking. We’ve lifted the heavy weight,” Han said with a smile. It was then I noticed the new marks on the clearing, like it was dug with a shovel and patted down with bare hands like Han and I always did it.

“We leave tomorrow at dawn,” Udo screamed to the darkening sky. “Right Ife.”

“That’s right, Udo,” Ife screamed as well.

At dawn. I was going to escape from home, but what was truly home without Hanye, I was glad she was going to be with me every step I took. The last hours passed in a blur: the boys going over maps, indicating with pink’s where we’d meet the next day, a brief explanation of places we had to avoid and the distribution of our tickets. I stood listening to them talk, wondering if they were having the same conversation when I’d arrived earlier. The option of leaving a man when injured behind had spun the subject of their quarrel earlier, and I was against the vile pictures the words brought.

Wolfs were beginning to howl and birds in trees became too noisy for me to hear myself think. It was time to leave the forest.

One our way home, we traced our way back to the meadow with the tied strings. I knew something was wrong when the second string was neither in any of our views. Guards with Ida blades surrounded us. Between them stood the Warden with a candle on a stick, glowing a good portion of her face as well as our surroundings as we all fell into darkness. Her mouth was twisted in a nasty grin and they opened to say. “I knew you were up to no good.”

At the signal of her arm, a guard gripped my arm tightly, I could see Han and the boys were also taken each by a guard. Then one of them gave them each a rope, to which all tied our arms tightly behind our backs and another in our mouth shutting up our many protests. I fingered the knot on my wrist, it wasn’t something I could undo on my own. Several questions crossed through my head, what were they going to do with us when we got back to the village? At this rate, our plans were drenched with hopes of never getting dry. Hanye struggled with her guard, knocking him on his nose with the back of her head. I saw blood. The guard slapped her and she fell from the force.

A shout rang out from me when her eyes refused to pry open. I tried to struggle away to get to her but my guards grip was steel-like. The warden snapped her tongue against her teeth in form of pity but I could see in her eyes she cared not a thing or two for the children under her care. She'd think we deserved it for defying the kings orders for crossing the gates. I watched Han's guards raise up her limp body over his shoulders, bouncing on it looking like a sack back of rice.

A row of the other guards stood behind us, staring blanking at the whole ordeal.

At first it was like we were diving into the thick midnight mist, but there was not smoke entering the nostrils, no wet grasses. Sounds of the birds seized, wolfs stopped howling, it was like the everything stood still. I watched the Wardens candle flicker and go off, darkness swallowing us, weightless, and absolute. I did something I would not do on a normal day, I held onto the guard feeling uncomfortable with the situation. I felt like I was standing on the edge of something.

I don't know how long we walked in the darkness, violently pushed forward, the only sounds were the gentle tap of our slippers. The village light I saw was up ahead, dancing candles flickering softly to the wind. I took a look back to see if everyone was okay; Hanye was still unconscious, Udo barley keeping up with the the guards harsh tugging and Ife just walked quietly looking around.

"Wait!" The guard upfront whispered, and his voice was hoarse and laced with fear. "What in the name."

"Why the wait?" the Warden asked.

We halted. I heard the guards quick breaths and saw the sparkle of lights from fireflies flying across our faces. Then I heard something, out no where came a clashing sound like two metals rubbing against each other, another sound, quick footsteps approaching and the strangled scream from beyond.

I stepped back, marrying my back to the guards beefy chest, strained my eyes to see in the black darkness, my heart pound in an unknown fear. We waited, listening, ears perked at any sound, I thought I could hear someone call a name. The wind stared against my cheeks, lightly kissing them.

My guard stepped away from me to collect the candle the Warden held. "Match," he commanded. The one holding Ife dug into one of the folds in his wrapper, throwing a packet of match. He caught it with skill. I squinted into the sudden brightness, waiting for my vision to adjust to the light. In the light, I saw him. I didn't know him and I didn't have to know him to know he was not human. Soon enough the him turned to them, they were ten of them, like herd of wolfs hunting for their preys. The Transcendents are knew didn't were armors in steel and carry thick axes, the guards wouldn't even be able to handle. Someone whispered in my ears, "Run!"

Attack noises rang around me, the guards in rows behind us raised their blades over their heads sweeping them down continuously when they approached their opponents. The Transcendents ran, the armor not restricting their fluid movements. I heard a strangled wail and

watched in terror as one of the guards fell, his head severed from his neck. The head rolled to where I was and I screamed, the eyes bleeding with crimson tears, looking lifeless. I struggled away from the distracted guards. Going over to Hanye's still unconscious body, crouched low beside her. During the time, the guards holding us had joined in the fight, southing as they went with their blades raised above their heads like the first. We hurdled together, the others coming to join me, crouching low to hide against the body.

"Untie Us," I told the Warden.

"It's Warden Chineyre to you," she hissed.

"We have not time for that. Untie us, quick."

"You stay right there. I don't want you running off," she said, giving us each a dirty eye-roll. "The guards will do their jobs and come protect us." It seemed with the last words she said, was her convincing herself we were going to survive this.

Around us, the men shouted and screamed. My insides turned pale when one of the screams tore my ear drums into pieces. It started with the Warden when she tried running, the Axe came down like a thunder bolt on her head and I saw her fall limp. More guards from the village, ran towards us ready for battle. Then it was a massacre. We were muttering our prayers and I my song to calm me down.

Hanye groaned, waking up with silted eyes. She looked to me confused. "What's happening?" her voice inaudible from the screams from the guards locked in a battle. Then a cry rents the air beside me. I tried to grab his arm, pull him away but the Transcendents were a lot faster than I was. "Run, run south!" He was injured on his arm, the axes had given him a clean cut but not enough to disarm the boy. He showed exceptional skills in combat, even with his hands tied to his back, he fought back with agility.

"Move!" It was Ife, his hands were free now, time was too short to ask how he did it. He grabbed the still confused Hanye, and I off the ground and we ran. I wonder what went through Ife's mind when he left his brother behind and heard his body fall with a thud after a heart wrenching scream.

A transcendent was following us at god speed, clawing it's axes across itself, eyes trained on our retreating backs. I was trying to move faster, the others were too, but the Transcendent was too fast. It rushed at us, Axe slashing on Ife's back, tearing his flesh in twos. He screamed in pain.

One of the guards came up with a bloody face, grabbing hold of the Transcendents Axe and stabbed it continuously on it's helmet. It struggled against his blade and screeched. It sounded like death had come to sweep away an innocent child. It trashed and wheezed to a stop. Then the guard shouted. "The head, get the head."

The guard nodded for us to go on. We continued running, not stopping, not even once until we got deeper into the forest. I felt a hand on my back and we fell, hitting a tree hard. My body felt hot, like it was lit on fire. I saw Hanye's eyes open. She lunged at something behind me, crashing on trees and more trees with groans. I wanted turn to help, but my body felt like fire, my insides cuddling.



“Hanye?” I managed to say, my voice coming out lower than I expected. My hand pressed down on my chest as the hotness overwhelmed me, in a desperate way to relieve it. Ain’t a fool to have thought it’d work. “Hanye?” I sobbed, tears streaming down my cheeks. More agonizing screams and shouts rose up around me, more blades clashed with Axes, fists met with trees and my screams overshadowed theirs. What was happening to me?

“Hanye?” I called out again, my voice this time didn’t bother coming out as a voice. It was in my head I called her name and cried for help. My breathing was labored, vision blurry unable to make out the world around me. Unable to keep my eyes open, I closed them.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Waking up was a beautiful experience except when you have a throbbing pain at the back of your head, your eyes wanting to fall its from its sockets. How many days had I gone unconscious, without food and water, I thought. All odds against me when the memories came rushing back like overflow of palm wine. I had to wake up.

If I was still in the forest, I had to wake up.

But I couldn't even if I tried.

The screams held me down, the bloody bodies of the guards falling like lifeless logs, one at a time and the horizontal slash on Ife's back. Hanye's groans made it worse. The song wouldn't save me, the guards couldn't save anyone when they too themselves went to the greater beyond. It was like a bad dream. The village was on fire, burning to the ground, someone had set it on with kerosene and a stick of match. His body wrapped was swallowed by the darkness of the night walking away for his havoc. I could only make out a small detail of the white cloth linen he wore until he was gone. My hands were in front of me, reaching out the the sizzling fire. I couldn't stop it from turning to ash.

I woke up with a start. This time I was truly awake, aware of the blood rushing to my head at a startling pace. Closing my eyes from the bright light I sat up, hands on cold ground, groaning along the way when my body felt like it had been beaten badly with a stick. I ignored it and sat up. I became aware of the confinement I stayed, a large structure of bars and wires. The sky above me was green as usual, white clouds danced along it and the whiff smell of nothing filled the air. Was I still in Tails or was I dead? Did Hanye die as well? I realized soon enough, the smoke rising with birds in triangles and a branch in their beaks.

I hauled myself closer to the bars. Every part of my body still aching, especially my back. I glanced outside and around. I found myself looking down at the grasses, about six meters above the ground. The cage swung in place attached to a tree. A single tent was pulled up across the cage, apparently harboring my captors, blocking the herd of heaving horses, although I could see their wet nostrils.

A long stick was batted on the cage. I dodged from the attack, well thinking it was an attack.

"Good. You wake," a young man below said in a dry voice. He was human, long jet black hair running down his shoulders were braided as one thick mop. His blue tunic was cut open in front of him, showing a pair of shorts he wore underneath, along with a pair of shoes I didn't recognize. Over it all was a long coat landing at the back of his knees. His looks made me question if he were truly one of us for his style was strange to my eyes. He swung the stick back around, jabbing it through one of the bars until it poked me and I yelped. "I thought you dead from no answer."

I stared at him. And he poked again. "What's wrong with you?"

"She wake," he called out over his shoulders, to the tent. I watched him reel the cage down with some sought of contraption, turning the wheels until I landed with a shake. He wrenched open the door through the bolt and I climbed out on all fours. The young man was joined by another, a woman this time in the same clothing as he, only her hair was different, like newly made pot of gold. Together they pulled me up, and led me forward. I stumbled upon movement, braising myself to keep me from falling. The girl's grip was deadlock, a far cry from the boys soft handle.

"Where are we going?" My voice still hoarse like rough sand. "Are you going to kill me?"

The girl rolled her eyes. “Do we look like monsters?” If I were to answer her question I would have nodded my head but I didn’t want to hasten my death. Up close, her jaw was chiseled and had a firm tick. Her arm bulged even in her clothing, I could make out the cylinder lines of the muscles.

Curiously, I peaked through the tent we were approaching and I saw nothing. Instinctively, I stretched to get a better look to know if I could make out something, or anything about the place before I entered but my arm slipped from the boys grip. To keep me from falling, he touched my back. A sudden, stabbing pain made me clutch my waist line and my other arm went to my back. I rubbed it lessening the pains.

The pains were becoming numb, and I was aware of the eyes curiously watching me. The pains were not as bad as when it happened at the forest, I couldn’t walk nor breath. “My back hurts.”

“Must be because he marked you. It’s going to hurt lesser the next time you feel it or worse.” The girl swept one of the opened side of her tunic away, undid a sash on her waist and grabbed a bottle. She tossed it at the boy who caught it with a swipe of his hands, and walked away muttering something about me being a weakling and her not sharing cups with weaklings. The boy swept his tunic aside like the girl did, taking a cup from his own sash. He carefully poured the contents into a cup and gave it to me. The liquid was green like the sky, dark dots swam in it and it did not smell good.

“It lessen the pain in back until it treats,” he pointed out. “Go on, drink.”

I reluctantly took a sip. It tasted better than it looked. “Is this some kind of medicine?” I greedily gulped down the rest of it, waiting for his answers.

“Horse shit and a sprinkle of leave. It do wonders,” he shrugged. “My mama teach me.” He sat behind my still body still trying to configure myself to the thought of drinking animal dung. I wished I could spit out. I gagged, coughing hysterically to the side, hoping what I drink would weasel out. He drew his legs up so his chin rested on them. “How did you do?”

“Do what?”

“Live?”

“Eat, sleep and dream.”

He shook his head. “No that. I ask question of the night Azuka found you. How did you fight off Hellers, Bush babies with scrawny body?” He looked at me narrowly. “We think you one of them.”

Was it going to be rude of me to shake off his question because I didn’t understand what he said. A quick image of that night crashed on me again, the lifeless eyes of that guard when it rolled towards me, scrunching the grasses, leaving a line of blood behind. “Who’s Azuka?”

“Part of us.”

“He saved me,” I said ghastly. “Do I get to see him?” I searched his eyes for answers, but I was surprised with his disgusted face.

He shrugged. “More like you yourself,” he said. “You one of them. I see it in eyes.”

“I am what of what?”

“Pieces of rotten egg,” he pointed out. “We should go now. They start look for us soon.” The boy managed his weight with a hand on the ground, and hurled himself up with a swift jump, landing on the place he once sat with an arched back, hands spread wide like an eagle.

“What’s your name?”

He looked at me perplexed. Then laughed out like I’d said something funny. “My name? If you die, you need no know my name,” he said. “My cup? Bottle?” he added.

I stretched my hands, and he took them away, keeping them back under his tunic, the bottle too.

“Tell me, are you two always like this?”

“We hate thing like you but we hate hellers more,” he answered without passing me so much of a glance. He drew his sash to a knot with both hands, and did again and again until I was sure his ribs was crushed underneath. “Enweghi Uche. Bloody beasts prowl with no brains.”

I was confused. “Are you not like me?”

He scowled. “You wish.”

The boy raised me to my feet by my arms and pulled me forward. He muttered something to himself and shook his head. A certain fear came over me. I felt a jab of what seemed to be many thoughts float around me, all trained on many subjects. Where was Hanye? I had a bad feeling about the whole ordeal. If he wasn’t human like me, then what was he? What about the girl? Who was behind the tent? My balled and my legs shivered when the dark tent loomed closer.

The entrance was door-less, only a slit was made to separate the outside from what was in. Directly above it was some kind of feather, steel and unmoving, locked in place with circular bars of five; one of them pointed to the east, the others, west, south, north and finally the last one pointed down. Hanye would have made fun of the last one, it represented nothing and she would have said it pointed to hell, I thought it too.

Everything strain of thoughts I had, disappeared into molted mist when we stepped into the tent. It was ridiculous. Gold and bronze were its basic interiors, glittering and blinding my vision, It could have made my mouth water, but it left me alarmed. If Tails were to have what was in it, our houses would no longer be made of muds and straws, mud puddles would be covered in bronze, no one would break a sweat to give their family foods. The streets filled with peddlers no longer needing to hide from the guards since they sold what we had. I stared, torn between fear and fascination.

The walls were covered with long Akwete cloth, the windows just the same; theirs were pushed aside to let in a good amount of light. Fly-whisk handles from bronze were crested on the walls, two long statues rose at length to meet the fly-whisk handles and the kissed at the top. The floors wore hand knotted rugs made from wool, brown and grey were their colors and their ends beautifully stitched into twos, joined with another to form fours. I could see a glimpse of the candle light plates of golds, the candles were lit, silent fire burning in place and the candle wax falling. Along the walls, the girl was sharpening a sword over another, her eyes strained on her work and her lips tucked in.

In the distance I could hear faint voices probably on the other-side of another slit made from the wall cloth, the winds blew and they fluttered in response. We made our way towards the slit, my feet I hadn't noticed were bare touched the soft texture of the rug, the feeling was warm under my heel and my toes dug into them leaving uneven marks. The voices grew louder the closer we got. I could identify it as two people having a civil conversation and a clank of glasses soon followed after.

We rounded a table of maps drawn on cork boards, spotted with drops of wet inks. Just were was I? Everything I'd seen proved to me I was no longer in Tails. A ripple of curiosity coursed through me and I wanted to know what was behind the slit. The first one caught me unaware, the second, I wonder. My heart hammered in my chest and I think my brain was going to have a beat of it's own.

By the time we got to the second slit, the boy signaled for the girl with an airy wave, and I knew she had received it well when the scratching of the blades came to a stop. She came to us and the boy handed me to her with a nod of his head, and went in, passed the slit. The girl tapped her heel and had her arms tucked into one another impatiently. My heart continued to hammer and I was sure if anyone would pull their ear closer to my chest, they'd be thrown away by the intensity of the beat. *Where was Hanye?*

After what seemed like forever, the boy returned and grabbed me again, pulling me inside. The girl followed behind.

Behind the slit was nothing different from after it. It was just smaller and harbored a magnificent table sitting at the center, made from delicate bronze and carvings of what looked like war. A man with no clothes was with sword, piercing it with gritted teeth in another man's hip. He wore no clothing too, only a piece of cloth was draped across his shoulders. Behind him was a building caught in a burning flame. People were burning in it, their open mouth speaking of their screams. It reminded me about the dream I had, the man in white linen setting my village on fire.

Two people were sitting behind the table, one at the head and the other on his left. My lips quivered and my legs turned to water. I hands flew to my mouth as I try to snuffle a sod. They were Transcendents, I knew from their bright skin, lighter than mine and their silky waist length hair. How did I not notice from the beginning, the girl and the boys obvious feature could have been a dead give away. I was slow at these kind of these. The one at the wind was young, maybe a year older than I was, spotting black hair and curvy brows. I noticed the brows stayed that way because he hand a finger lifting them. His back was relaxed on the chair, eyes droopy and his lip placed in a fine line. The one at the head looked kinder and was much older, white hairs replaced normal dark brows and hair. They were both thin, but the older man was thinner and scrawny looking, probably because of his age.

Stuck to the wall, behind them were cross swords in its white shirts, beautifully blending with everything room.

“They say the one would like carvings of war for it was born in its time,” the older man said. He sounded wise like he’d lived through many years and seen times of sorrows and happiness, I could see it swimming in his eyes. “Let her go Chibuzor.”

The younger one chuckled. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. She’s going to fall.”

Assuming the boy was who he spoke to, he let go of my arms.

I looked back at the silt, but it was no longer there. The girl had covered it with her mountain of a body, her thick chest being the only thing my eyes came in contact with. My curiosity had withered and what I wanted was to get out if I could. They were watching me.

I hadn’t realized I had held my breath hard until my voice wheezed when I asked. “Where is Hanye? What did you do to her?”

The younger one tapped his free hands on the table and bent his body sideways. He whispered something in his ears to which the older one nodded to it. Through out, their gazes were focus, and nerve wrecking. The younger one stood up, running his eyes from my heads to my toes. I felt naked under his gaze. He stepped away. I sniffled another gasp when he approached. At first it seemed to her like his legs were deformed, a portion swollen from a wound. It was when he got closer I noticed a well placed snake was having its peace.

“What’s your name?” he asked. “How did only you survive the mark of a heller when the village was torn apart?”

“Kamsie.” I said. “Mind you, the village was not torn apart. We were just attacked by the Transcendents.” I emphasized on the word Transcendent, for them to know I knew of their evil.

He smirked. “Tell me more.”

“Why would I tell you, you’re all like them,” I said angrily. My words came out before I knew it. Every eyes were on me now, but I could only care less. “They came in masses, in some kind of amour and carried an Axe that could slice anything clean. If I carried it I would die from its weight. Their amour glittered when they made clean cuts on the guards necks. My friend fell to their Axe’s too. Tell me why I wouldn’t call you monsters.”

The older man cleared his throat. “Blaming is not a good fit for the owner of its cock. I understand your pain.”

“No you don’t!” My voice louder than I expected. “None of you do.”

Someone jabbed a fist on my waist and I stumbled forward. “Leave us,” said the older man. Almost immediately, I felt warmth leave my side and retreating footsteps disappeared backwards until I heard them no more.

“Come sit,” the older man spoke softly, gesturing to the place where the younger one once sat. When he smiled, the wrinkled lines on his face became pronounced, like crumpled clothes after a wash. “Come tell us how a chick survived a snake attack, Kamsie.”

Survive, lived, I have heard the words more times I could count my name on the Warden’s lips. I watched the chair like a hawk as I approached it, carefully avoiding the younger man with the snake and sat on it. It was warm like the rug, I felt myself relaxing into it. A sharp laugh sounded through the room, coming from the young man. “Don’t tell me you too believe she survived a heller’s mark?”

“You questioned it too Azuka, remember?”

“She could have pretended to be dead.”

It was after a moment I realized the meaning of his words. I was caught up in the thoughts that this Azuka was the one who saved me during the raid, but from their words it seemed I saved myself or something like that. I was fascinated with their thought's that someone like me could have batted away death when the strongest shoulders fell like fallen branches when taken off from their parent stalks. I wanted to say something to clear up the assumption and thank Azuka for saving my life but the two were having silent conversations with their eyes. Azuka was in the same outfit as Chibuzor and the girl but the old man was in a simple kaftan.

“I na-ezere eziokwu ahu bu na nwa ahu nwere ike buru otu,” the older man said.

Azuka raised his eyebrows. He huffed. “I choro. Look at her- she doesn’t look like someone who would hurt a fly. She’s human. I was told she’ll be more than this.”

“The gods never make mistakes. You know that,” the old man replied.

“Well they did on this one,” Azuka said dryly. “I risked my life for this moment, and I get this. What are we supposed to do with this Kamfeechi?” He slapped his hands hard on the desk.

“I’m not a mistake.” I interrupted. “My parents might not have wanted me, but I am no mistake.”

“Sorry but you are,” Azuka said. “The gods choose you in order to punish me.”

“We cannot conclude until we see what she can do. She survived the hellers mark, didn’t she? You know she did?” Kamfeechi stood up. “The council’s making never failed the king, this one wouldn’t.”

“This is absurd,” Azuka protested. “I’m telling you Kamfeechi- we have to go back to the Eze mor to get direction the right person.”

“We’ll see once we know for sure.”

I suddenly felt tired. My back ache coming back, accompanied with a dull head ache this time. At the back of my head, it felt like something was eating a part of my brains out, making me wince.

Azuka laughed. “I told you-weak.”

Kamfeechi’s mouth tightened. “It is right for her to be with us so that she will know what she is. What she is to us all in Ebos.”

“The council will be furious if they knew she’s human.”

“Not entirely.”

“But she smells like them, looks like them and dresses like them.”

“She grew up there. Of course she’ll smell, look and dress like them. Besides they are part of her as we are too.”

“Then why couldn’t she save her people from burning into dust,” Azuka scoffed. “So much for them being a pat of her.”

Dust? Burnt? I wondered where their discussion was leading to. “What really happened in my village? Where is Hanye?” Azuka looked at her in blinding dislike and Kamfeechi’s drew a sad smile.

“We were too late,” said Kamfeechi, his look weighted with worry and fear.

“Dead, gone. Get over it,” Azuka answered.

I glanced at the both of them, unable to assimilate their words. I’ve never felt my system go so cold like water left outside in clay pot to drink on a hot day. I wondered how much blood drained from me with their words, I felt so pale and so cold. I help the surge of helpless anguish coming over me and the anger seemed to overflow. Something deep within me told me I was at fault, if I were not down because of my back, I could have saved her and we would have ran way to somewhere safer.

“She cannot be gone,” my voice cut through the room like the Transcendents Axe swipe.

Azuka opened his mouth to say something, but Kamfeechi silenced him with the raise of his hands. I swallowed a heavy lump down my scratchy throat. My throat was dry and itchy and I knew I had to do something. I had to get back to the village. There was no way she’d be gone, I might just find her at the orphanage sitting in my room, reading the mistakes I’d made on my paper leaves. I rammed my legs to the ground, getting up, ready to make my way out of the tent.

“I’ll like to assume you are not thinking about going back to your village. There is not place in it for you, or for anyone with the state it’s left in.” Kamfeechi said. “Anyone alive would have run off to the Body by now.”

I rose my chin stubbornly. “You assume correctly,” I said. “I am going back to find my family.”

Azuka’s lip quivered to a smile. But I saw that he was trying to cover it when he turned, coughing into his hands.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Azuka said. “You’re dumb, aren’t you?”

“Azuka!” the older man warned.

The younger boy shrugged. “What? It just that I remember the council saying whoever we find would be quick to action, quick to tie strings and quick to get out of situations.ke a abughi ihe anyi turu anya ya, he said. “And with a mother’s instinct.”

“I’m not with child,” I clarified.

Kamfeechi’s eyes shot to his hairline and stayed there. I could see the gears turning inside his head at what the boy said. I saw Azuka move back with slight nervousness and it was satisfying to see him crumble under Kamfeechi’s scrutiny. In a tone I hadn’t expect to hear from such scrawny man, he said. “Open your mouth.”

“Why?”

The older man reached for my arm in a tight grip, pulling me forward into his personal circle. I looked around in panic and I saw Azuka’s head in his palms like he’d done something shameful. The others came in with calabash plates of food, seemingly lunch- I hadn’t had time to check the sun and they paused watching with curiosity. Soon, their features melted into one of horror. The girl said something harshly to Azuka and he looked away.

“Open your mouth Kamsie,” the old man repeated.

Shaking, I opened my mouth.



Kamfeechi took his hands and tightened my throat. I struggled to breath and struggled more when something blue came out of his mouth and entered mine. It felt suffocating, like an unhealthy smoke from burning firewood. I squirmed, and fought for air. I died, for a moment I was surrounded with thick blackness- no sound, no people, just blackness, empty blackness. Then I heard hissing, things at length were circling my legs but I couldn't see them, it was still dark. To my utter most fear, those things danced like snakes, and I felt them entering underneath my tunic. I was told that when a snake gets on your skin, you dared not make a move to avoid getting a poisonous bite from them. So I stayed still in place.

To my relief, white like shone and I came back to the room.

"Luckily, I was able to destroy the snake eggs before it could hatch," Kemfeechi said. With a baffled glance in Azuka's direction, he threw the eggs I hadn't noticed in his hands at him. "Are you out of your mind?" He slammed his hand down on the desk too hard, that I saw it wear a new crack. "She could have died if she were truly human."

"Died is a strong word," said Azuka.

"But she didn't Kemfeechi. He was trying to be cautious," the girl defended. "She could have been the wrong one."

I didn't think I was broken not to fear something vile was inside of me. All my thoughts were clouded on where I had to be and who I was going to find. I looked to the bickering bunch, searching for a way I was going to get past them. Chibuzor had joined in and he was shielding them from the slit, the very slit that would be my ticket out. The next moment I slid my behind on the edges of the desk, and carefully, I left the room.

## CHAPTER SIX

The gods protect, that was what they did. They had every responsibility to keeping those below safe and I prayed they did this time, I silently wished Azuka and the rest had not spoken the truth. I was engulfed in scary silence.

Thankfully, we were not far from Tails, I recognized the area as one of the many areas I ventured to when I was much younger. I stuck close to the familiar family of long trees, keeping close watch of the squirrels which scurried by, and the slippery grasses. I quickened my step when I got to the meadow where everything happened. The place was clean, events of the attack was not present, no blood, no swords and no heads. When I got to the banana high linked gates of the village, I spun half-expecting to see the Transcendents at my heels. But the meadow was empty, the grasses dancing. For a moment, I stared relieving that night, unable to unclog my system for the ferocious event. My eyes roamed with uncertainty into the spaces the trees gave way. Something might jump out any time now. Nothing moved within them. I turned around and opened the gates where no guards manned and ran home.

The village was empty like it always was in the morning, the windows were shut and so were the doors. The houses were as rickety as always and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. My chest bloomed like little buds of hibiscus, an invisible smile dancing on my lips. They had been wrong, the village was not burnt to ash. At the bottom of the rope leading up the hill, I met the usual crowd of men and women with baskets of fruits waiting for one of the farmers beside our home to climb down. I barreled up and down on the balls of my feet impatiently while waiting for the others to climb up before it was my turn. I tried looking up to see if one of the children were out playing their usual games but the hill was too high to see what was on it.

Wrenching my hands on each of the rungs, I climbed seeing the familiar roof of the place I called home. When I got to the top, the door was open, the outside lamp was burned out, evident signs people were in. Everything was fine, I told myself. Nothing out of the ordinary yet.

As I stepped in, I could sense something was wrong and the feeling heightened when I strolled deeper. Not liking how quiet and lonely I felt, dark the place seemed to be, I went to one of the lamps and took a match, struck it and the hallway illuminated with warm light. I plucked the lamp off the wall. The morning shadows skimmed like rabbits about to jump into a hole of secret stories.

In a matter of time, I reached my door. It was unlocked, hanging slightly open from its frame and the mud threshold was wet; it looked like water had recently spilled on it. "Hanye?" I asked, with the feeling of extreme relieve, I pushed the door wider.

Inside my room was like I left it but dark because the thatch was shut. Strings of light got in from the tiny spaces. My lamp brightened the room better, and it let my eyes notice the figure standing the thatch facing away from me. "Hanye, is that you?"

There was no reply. Her hands were holding out something, her ticket the boys gave us before it happened. The boys, I'd forgotten them. Their deaths were sad, and heartbreaking and thinking about it now was not what I wanted. I wanted to lay in the arms of my friend and forget

life was lived. I went in further, closer and quicker, placing my hands on her shoulders.

It wasn't Hanye. I came face to face with the Warden's snarling face.

"And where did you think you were going to run off to?" she said, throwing the ticket at me. It hit me squarely on the face, and fell, the rough edges sticking to the wool of my dress.

Heart beating at an alarming pace, I didn't know what to do. What happened to her wounds? I stepped back, my words stumbling from my lips. "It's not. I thought..."

The Warden withdrew, going to sit on my bed. She wedged into it like an uncomfortable mat. Was it just me or did she seem older than she usually was. Laugh lines marked around her mouth, thicker than usual. "Hanye told me you were both going to run away from Tails. A bold move from rats like you. Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"You died. I saw..." I said, still unable to mince out meaningful words.

"I knew you wouldn't stay put when I told you you were going to leave. I should have not told you at all. Gone puff like the wind. I will like that." She rubbed two of her fingers on my raffia sheets. "What do you think life would be without you, Chikamsie? Good, quite, peaceful?"

"I do not understand where this is..."

"Fanan will be at peace. He will no longer fear for the worse." Fanan? Where have I heard the name before? I tried thinking for something to come up at the back of my head, nothing did. There was no hope. The Warden sat in, sniffing the air and exhaling after a long time. She smiled like someone had made a joke. Made her smile. That was true, where was Bingo. She always had Bingo with her when she wasn't out teaching the children. "You won't find her here," she said without looking at me, her face still up watching.

"What?"

She sighed. "Hanye. She's not here."

"Then where is she?"

She shrugged. "Fanan took her. Don't worry, he won't kill her for now. He wants you to submit yourself to him before the red moon." I've known Warden for a long time, and never had she felt unbothered when something happened to one of her own, except she caused it herself. From her words, I could deduce she wasn't acting like her usual self. Despite that, a sob rose in my chest, Hanye, I cried inside, what happened? A wave of relief surged through me, at least she wasn't dead.

Stomach contorting in ominous strength I said, "We have to get her back. We have to notify the king. He can send his guards."

"And how do you think you will be able to do that when you can't leave the room?"

For a moment I couldn't understand her words, until she got up and her arms were dead. Limp at her side, her dark skin was like dried catfish, tongue elongated to her chest, sharp nails clipped together and her tail wagged. She crouched down against the floor and the shimmer of what looked like rays shone on her red eyes, dancing at the center, was a line. I watched in horror as she morphed into this with strident cracks and wails of a child.

Something was happening, the walls around me were beginning to change, melt. It was

unnerving. Ash fell from the sky and the ground rattled. I had to dig my toes into the ground for the walls had disappeared into nothing but that did nothing to hold me down. Short hair at the nape of my neck rose with the rapid change of my surrounding. It was like my breath was knocked out of me as I took in what I knew to be Tails. It was all covered in ash; the orphanage, the houses around, only the gates stood high. The villagers I had seen were gone now, only silence took their place.

A harsh whip on my head knocked me down, my body ramming into the ash, covering me all over.

I released a shirk when it lunged at me. Clamoring to my feet, I dodged the attack, falling again and getting up almost immediately before it lunged the second time. It used its tail to whip my legs and it missed one, getting the other, sharp spikes pierced into my skin. And I fell. A loud baby cry resonated from its lips followed by airy voice like multiple people were speaking. "Come. Me. Kamsie."

The creature picked up its speed making a grab of my injured leg. Red dots stained blacks. My fingers stretched out, fighting against the pull with them begging for something to hold on to. I fought with my good leg, matching down its skull-it was meaty and squishy like opened up soursop. I closed my eyes gritting my teeth when it turned me, landing on the spot which hurt. This was how I was going to die, they was no going against something stronger than I was.

Yet I continued struggling and thrashing, getting closer and closer to it. Purple jewel fell from my pockets, laying at my side in its glittering monstrosity. Quickly I picked it, flinging it at it. I threw it a bit to high because it went above its head. Despite my abominous aim, it got its attention. Its seize loosened and I used it at my disposal. Crawling out, I limped away, my injured leg feeling weighed down. What used to be the front door, now a pile of ashy hill, was the way I took out. I was still used to using the door, not thinking my escape could have been cut short if I had gone through where walls used to stand.

I could hear the creature gaining momentum from behind. Drizzle like steps became clearer and clearer, lessening the distance between the two of us. I clutched my arms, squeezing trying to tell myself it was a dream. Another bad dream I needed to wake up from. A few moments ago I thought I could go back to the way things were, daily steals and what not, now the dream was far out of reach. With a pang, I thought of what happened to the villagers. They must have ran away or burnt into ash. I stepped on a heap - it could be a person. This truly had to be a dream, some crazy hallucinations caused by the attack. I hadn't really thought of how many days had gone by since then, but what different could it make. The village was still down to the ground.

Another creature stopped me in my tracks. I could tell this one was different from the other one. It was shorter and filled up a bigger space with its big size. I looked back to see if I could run back, but there were flaring nostrils and a body of strong mammal. They growled, angry and thirsty for blood.

Someone laughed, a big hearty express of mockery. "I'm shocked, you cannot match a Bush baby." I stared in surprise at Azuka's figure sitting flat on the ground. Noticing his comfortable figure, it told me he had been there longer than I knew. His voice had attracted the other, Bush

baby that chased me. It loomed over him, giant like shadows covered his being, translucent drool dripped like silent waters- it was like it wanted to have a bite of his skin. They wanted me, but they wouldn't kill, him, I wasn't so sure.

Azuka stood up taking his time, unaffected by the danger. I could sense the pride all over him and I think he deserved it when he drew out a long Ukpuru and gave a satisfying slash on the creature's head. Although it didn't die, the force applied that I saw it stagger. He raised his blade, saying: "Nwuo!"

He whirled round and struck out, slashing once more at the Bush baby, who fell with a heavy snotty scream. The boy was that powerful and he knew it. I was distracted by the eye-catching event, and forgotten about the second creature abaft by the edge of the hill. It grabbed me under its arms, handling me roughly with a claw at my throat; its smelling skin made me crinkle my nostrils.

In my struggle, I must have knocked my head into its head, because it let out a howl and clawed on my cheek enough to leave a mark. I twisted and kicked as the creature was backing away. I looked desperately at Azuka who was still fighting its opponent and it seemed the fight would soon be over because there was nothing left of the creature to swing. Its movements were no longer fluid and arms had long kissed the ground and had grown pale like a flower that was cut off.

The one holding me jumped down the hill, and landed with balance. "Fanana. Now," it said, voice airy like the other one.

"Azuka!" I cried out. I saw the said boy racing towards me with a light splash of blood which was not his own on his clothes.

At some point it started towards the gates but stopped in its track to look down the cramp of a path when a group of riders with a carriage slammed through the same gates on horses pounding on hooves. The riders were dressed in uniform, swords of electric lightening danced when they stuck it out in front of them.

I felt something wet dripping on top of me and I looked up, sharp ice had passed through the creature's skull. I found a voice and screamed. I fell down like an apple from its release, struggling to my feet, I ran.

I ran towards the direction of the riders. Curse my heart for feeling relieved when the strangers turned out to be the rest of the Transcendents. They slid from the mount, the girl taking me by my arm and Chibuzor going past us.

"I don't need your help," Azuka told Chibuzor, breathing heavily from the battle. "Go!"

I watched in mingled awe and a bit of horror as Azuka gracefully handled his ice breathing sword and realized Hanye was right. The Transcendents did have powers of their own and the difference was clear in our strengths.

The girl said something to me when we got to the door of the carriage, but I couldn't hear over the growling of the struggling creature. She opened the door and gathered me inside in a rush. I held my breath and fell upon silence with the worried looking Kamfeechi.

His eyes darted right and left, then to my bloodied cheek where the lines of liquid were

falling down to my jaw line. “The gods bear this witness?” As he shifted closer, wanting to touch me, I moved away.

“No.”

He stopped.

A few minutes later Azuka entered the Carriage and the other two back on the horses. I felt the carriage turning with agonizing speed, my stomach not able to stomach such movement, a bile of goo rose up to my throat.

“There might be more of them and they’ll know the path we’ll take,” said Azuka calling outside the window. “We take the sunset path to keep them off our leash.”

They were more of them? Just how many?

As if Kamfeechi could read my thoughts, he answered, “The numbers he has under his control is enormous.”

“He will send more. Until he gets what he wants. You,” Azuka finished.

It seemed this Fanan was out to get me and I was yet to fully grasp the reason why. It seemed I had no choice but to go with them to the Head, it was the only way I could get what I wanted. The Carriage jerked on a stone, and I hopped into Azuka’s personal space, jamming hips together. He needed to say no words when his eyes spoke of his disapproval, irritability with my whole being. I scooted away.

As we fell into a desert path, I realized the reality of what was happening sink into me.

“The War- I mean the creature said Fanan has my friend.”

“Ransom. She is least priority,” Azuka said.

I turned to look at him. He was looking outside, his arms folded around his torso and I got the feeling he really didn’t care. Kamfeechi’s attention was barely on us, fondling with a leaf he was writing on. I turned back to him and said, “I don’t know what you are but know that the only reason I’m coming is because of my friend,” I kept my voice above average, affected by his words and feeling still jumpy from being chased by my nightmares. He looked taken aback. Perhaps, he hadn’t had a human speak to him that way.

“As much as I do not want you, we need you. You have no choice,” he gritted his teeth.

I sat up. “I can jump off this carriage anytime and find my way,” I followed up harshly.

“Be my guest. Jump and you’ll be Fanan’s feast.”

“I thought you needed me. What do will it do you if I died?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but was short of words. He seemed to register what I had said. “That’s what I thought.” His final reply was a huff. Ticking his left cheek, he turned and faced outside once again. Nothing more was said between us.

I looked outside too on my own side and closed my eyes. I tried not to think this time, exhausted from many thoughts.

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It had gotten out of hand. Kamfeechi never one day imagined Fanan would have taken a

drastic measure as the one he took. And it only meant one thing, he was running out of time. Frowning, Kamfeechi Oyebuchi carefully and proficiently wrote on the piece of leave, to avoid the gallops from leaving unwanted lines. Yet, he wrote with urgency and certainty. Kamfeechi knew what he was doing when he hadn't spilled all the details to Kamsie, although he glazed on the topic. She would have never come with them if she knew the whole truth.

The carriage accelerated and it bumped into a stone. The force jerked him forward, and he stepped in place to keep himself still. His ink hadn't stained his leaf, but his chest hurt. It hurt so bad, it reminded him that his own time was limited too. He dipped his shaky hands into his pockets, and took out a glowing purple jewelry. He pressed it hard on his chest. It was the same jewelry Kamsie had with her. He knew when he saw it with her she was the one. It was specially made for people like them. But he was the only one who knew this, believing it could come as a weakness if another soul knew, even if you trusted them with your life.

The pains gone and the jewelry back in his dress. He continued to write, addressing the receiver as a them. Images of his past weighed down on him like stumbling blocks. He had lived through the war to know no sides were to blame but the temptation of greed and Retaliatory anger. The memories never left him and he was positive it left no one at all, as long as they lived through the war. Fanan.

With a crossed hatch sign, he rapped his hands and the carriage slowed down. Neatly folding the leave into fours, he stuck out his hands out the window, leaving it fall where the orator would find. He trusted when he found it, the sign will instruct him on what to do.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tears welled in my eyes from the filter of dusts, my eye lids painful to shut in a blink. The lifeless road passed in a blur, mirages of what seemed like buildings and carpentry stood far dancing in the uprise of the dusts. My eyes stood open wide yet I was not seeing. I imagined what I would have been doing if all was calm and hazy, slipping into the markets again this time not alone. It would be a normal day when we settled our heads in the minimal crowd, skimming away cowries in pouches, red maybe and other things worthy of our dirty hands. The guards searching for peddlers unaware of the operation under their very nostrils. At the dawn of the day, with our pockets filled with steals, we would run back to our safe place to settle in. Then I imagined a bit past normality, a staircase leading down to a shed and we'd be the only ones there, just the two of us and it'd be our home; no more Warden, just us and ourselves. But that wasn't going to happen, was it? The king found out our hideout and our steals, the warden was behind him unable to suppress her giggles and laughs. When his guards grabbed us by wrists, the shadow moved a bit. White linen danced out of the shadows but it was all I could see from the figure hiding. At the tip of this cloth, there was a stain, crimson stains. I wanted to scream at them to watch, but my voice was caught in my throat, I was unable to say anything. The guards were in my visibility area, so I couldn't see who was behind the shadows. They fell like slain cows, one after the other, enough to tell me they were outmatched. I could sense it too, that blood thirsty aura but for so reason I wasn't shaken. It was walking closer to me. I could see the legs, it was human but was wrapped in white strings. My feet moved closer too. Hands were out and I wanted to touch. I was going to touch.

My body slammed into a hard surface, and my eyes flew to meet dark skies. My heart hammered in my chest, taking a long look around trying to figure out where I was. Raised eyebrows and nonchalant eyes stared me down; I just have fallen asleep during the ride. I'd lost all senses of where we were and how close we had gotten to the Head. My surrounding was unfamiliar, I stared at the strange architecture upfront and I tired not thinking we were lost.

"We have to rest. The horses get tired after riding for hours," Kamfeechi said from inside the carriage. His voice was brimming with fatigue and eyes halfway from being shut. Azuka shut the carriage doors, without sparing me a glance he walked off, joining the other two picking up firewoods. Not, it seemed like he was going to join them for a moment, but he walked passed them and out of sight, disappearing behind trees.

I felt stiff when I stood, and was welcomed with dry throat and a coated tongue. I wanted to ask someone if there was a stream close by but Kamfeechi was fast asleep. It meant I had to cajole myself towards Chibuzor and the girl. I strolled awkwardly towards them, my movements catching their eyes. They were still bent down, searching for suitable dry branches.

"Are there any streams where I can drink from?"

The girl rolled her eyes, getting up with the load in her hands, bumped my shoulders in and walked away. I staggered a little from the force.

"She don't like you," Chibuzor confirmed, standing up.



“I think I had that figured out a while ago.”

“Azuka don’t like you too.”

“And you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t like you too but I manage,” he admitted. “You find stream a bit further from tree.” He nodded his head towards where Azuka had gone through.

“Thank you.”

Chibuzor regarded me with a chin, straddling off with his load. I glanced at the tree I was to pass, hoping silently I wouldn’t have to bump into Azuka.

On entering, I thought the stream would be easy to find. He had not told me to move either, east, west or north, only telling me it was a bit further from the tree. I picked up a stone and named it by the cardinals. Throwing it a bit in my hands, I flung it up with a spin. Some parts of my body still ached, I must have thrown it a bit too hard. The object stayed in the air for some time, the named sides rotating with rapid speed and finally, it dropped.

I wanted to race when the smell of fresh water attacked my nostrils. But the lumping stones leading down were rough looking, mixed matched with smaller pebbles that I settled for little steps, awkwardly perching on slabs to enable a better descent. I obviously didn’t want anymore more injuries on my body, I’ve had enough. The stones were steep, and it twirled directly into the waters, amid the cries of Katydid and crickets and the gallant swirls of fireflies. I managed my step, and soon I reached the waters, my legs wet deep in.

With my butt elevated, I bent low, cupping my hands to collect cold liquid. It was icy on my lips. The cold water made me drunk and felt like a luxury down my throat, greedily continuing downing until my fingers felt numb. When I was done, my reflection waved back in shakes. I was looked beat up, not that I wasn’t. Kneeling in and my head dunked, I washed my face, arms and legs, scrubbing where blood seemed coated, wincing from the slight pains. Untying the knot around my waist, I let my tunic sag around my body. Placing my hands on the edges, I lifted my dress above my head leaving me with my birth bead fitted to my waist. The air around me changed, the night wind bashing on my back leaving a tingling sensation on the injured spot.

Falling deep into the water, I held my breath relaxing my achy body in the melting temperature. Little fishes swam around my peripheral, some of their mouths kissing my wounds, not enough to leave me alarmed. I stretched out my arms to ease myself, the fishes swimming away in fright of death when I continued to flap them back and forth. How was I going to find Hanye in all of Heads, I asked myself still submerged. And it was somewhere unknown to me. I didn’t think they’d be quite accepting of the human me, just like the humans were not happy to accept their people. We killed their people in the most gruesome way possible, I wondered what they did to people like me and I was sure I would have experienced that if they didn’t need me. But that was of their own very opinion, what of the others in Head? Did they know a stranger was coming?

The littlest rumble above me caught my attention. I allowed only my eyes wander from under, I saw no one. But that didn’t stop me from suspecting someone or something was within

the area. Carefully I raised my hands and made a grab of my clothes. Coming out of the water, I wore them with eyes searching for that thing or one which might be lurking in the dark. And what would I say to Hanye when I finally found her? Thank you for saving me and sorry you had to be bait for my life.

“Ask Aruna how I made my hair.”

I turning a bit to fast to where I heard the voice. The space was empty and dim lit with the fireflies orange light. In the deep darkness ahead, a little girl walked out, her hair braided in ojongo with one wrapper tied around her chest and another short around her waist. She was of the age like the children at the orphanage, ten at most. A ghost of a smile registered on her face when the distance between us lessened. The girl diverted to one of the water stones, sitting with her legs tucked into her and bent her head.

“Ask Aruna how I made my hair. If you do, Aruna make your’s too,” she said, giving me that Innocent smile children usually had; eyes wide like holes and cheek puffed like buns. I took my time to study her hair. Her hair was raised three inches up , the sides plaited one back and into a curve having a ring worm sought of appearance. The front was like a band, plaited it in backward braids across her scalp. Her head was beautified with cloth and mud containing colorful ores; yellow and red camwood. It was obvious it was done by someone with talent. Our villagers usually stuck with easy Akator and all backs.

“Your mother made it for you,” I answered, surely I must have gotten it right.

She shook her head. “Aruna made it myself. Aruna looks beautiful don’t she?” She jumped up and landed with a foot up, the other bouncing. “Don’t worry I can still make yours too. Come on. Come closer and I’ll make you as beautiful as I am.”

“Why? I answered your question wrongly.”

“Belonging is a chore. Aruna and you must learn to look out for ourselves even though we have limited time.”

“Sorry I don’t...”

“Aruna will tell you more when Aruna braids your hair,” she said, holding out her hands for me to take. “Come on. Aruna means well.” She stared me up with brown eyes, so tempting my legs were already shifting towards her. *You must come to Aruna, its the only way.* Only way for what, I thought.

A blur flew passed my head and the girl hissed like a rattle snake at something behind me. She crouched low and hissed again before running with the same height into the darkness. It happened so quick I was unable to react. *Aruna will see you again.*

“Are you always this slow?”

I whirled and peered into the gloom with slit eyes. Azuka’s voice bounced over the deepening shadows, and he walked closer to the waters. He bent and cupped in hand in the waters, taking a long drink from it.

“You scared her away.”

“You mean I saved you.”

“Saved?” I asked.

“It was an Oroma, the headless girl looking for some stupid girl to pop her head off to give her the finest braid.”

“My head?” Instinctively, I touched my neck. It felt stiff from his words and tight at the thought of the girl taking my head off to braid it.

Azuka gave me a side glance, regarding me in the light of the fireflies. I felt scrutinized under his obvious study, and uncomfortable still. His clothes were stained with nothing other than the golden blood of the Bush babies. It was little. Other than that, he was clean, better than me. Although I washed the stains away from me, my clothes were adorned with holes and tears no threads would fix. Liquid from my body turned my tunic wet, gluing to my body like a second skin and obvious contours no one should see were bare under the light. I flushed with embarrassment, covering my chest with my hands. I hope he hadn’t seen anything.

“You should be careful who you make friends with.”

“It’s not like it was my fault,” I mumbled.

“Good for you,” he said before taking another sip. He gargled some in its mouth, spitting it away back into the stream.

“Why do you hate me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t hate you. I hate what’s you,” he said with little concern.

“What is that suppose mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

He splashed some on his face and stood. “You should learn to protect yourself on your own. I cannot keep doing that for you.” He began walking back up the stones.

“Are you not going to tell me the real reason why you people need me in Head?”

He ignored me and finished the short journey up without even sparing me a glance. He was infuriating and annoying to the point I wanted to wish the girl to have his head, and smack it senseless. If I wasn’t so, so below his strength, I could have done just that. Well maybe not only below his strength, I was plain as day scared of having the girl anywhere near me. It was because of such reason I followed Azuka close behind.

The smell of roasted fishes attacked my nostrils. Just then my stomach rumbled from hunger and churned in delight. Chibuzor and the girl who I later learned her name was Zinachidinma shifted catfishes on sticks into the burning fire they had set up. Apparently, there was another stream near by with catfishes dancing with in and they had caught in with some of the branches they had gathered. They were the only ones there when I arrived, Kamfeechi was still in the carriage sleeping away unaffected by the mumbling voices and rising smoke.

Zinachidinma threw a stick at me and I caught it with luck. I took a sit beside the fire and ate blocking out anything which didn’t concern satisfying my eminent hunger. Azuka stayed away and I think it was because of me. I attacked the fish, tearing and chewing. The roasted delicacy bounced in my mouth savoring the taste of each parts. It took quite a while to finish up and when I was done the girl was getting up with the last set of fishes in her hands. My eyes traced her steps to where the horses slept, to the left where Azuka sat laying his head on a woody plant.

“You sleep. We leave early morning,” Chibuzor said, splitting my attention. I wanted to ask

where our heads would lay for the night when I noticed his body stretching out on the ground and his arms under his head.

In the dimming light, I watched Zinachidinma taking a sit beside Azuka. I could sense the tension between them when they talked, Zinachidinma throwing her hands holding the stick in the air. Well it was more of the girl talking and him nonchalantly looking away. The stick of fish raised high to his lips and he moved his head just a little to avoid it. I noticed he was shifting away from her slowly, and slowly he got up. He must have noticed me watching them because he turned to look my way. To my dismay, he came towards me, sitting down beside me. Taking my stick away from me, he used it to scatter the gather of ashes as if he was searching for something. He drew out a over cooked crumbles of fish and placed it in his mouth. I remember searching for crumbles with Hanye this one time the village had fallen dry of food.

He chewed, gulped and said, "Stop it." He must have sensed the questions I was suppressing within me. The ones along the line of too personal and within my right, and it was overflowing with shimmers of exhaustion and nonsensical excitement. I wanted to start out with a question that wouldn't expose my curiosity but then I felt myself asking.

"Is she your woman?"

"No."

"Who is she to you."

"Betrothed."

I blinked. "Then she's your woman."

Azuka shrugged. "Maybe. Something like that."

"Are you always this annoying or I am the problem."

He shrugged once more and I flashed him an annoyed look. If she truly was his betrothed as he said she was, I figured out he didn't like the idea of it as much. "What is a betrothed to you?"

"How would I know? I have never been in that situation."

"Just tell me. I'm curious to hear your opinion."

"In my village, it only happened to soon to be kings. His parents would search for someone of their like and make her his wife, regardless of who he likes or not. I only heard stories about them from the elderly," I answered giving him a sour look.

"It works almost the same way in Head. Every parent betroth their male children from birth."

"How old are you?" I blurted out.

"Old enough to know things, but still too young to make life decisions."

"You could have just said you didn't want to answer." I looked to the dying flames. "You had a choice."

"How old are you," he asked me. I turned, he was already staring down his own side of the flames, the side of his face shining orange. "If I were to have my sword under your throat and ask you the same question, you wouldn't have a choice."

I shrieked. Chibuzor snored almost immediately, shifting to face away from us.

"You would not do that," I said quietly. He wouldn't right?

"No," he admitted. "But I would like to, especially to every one who slaughtered my people in

cold blood.” His fists were pumped, almost like he wanted to punch. I would dare tell him I knew what his people went through, then he’ll know I saw.

“Why do you people need me?”

“To seal the division.”

“The kings signed a treaty after the war to never cross path.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “But only for thirteen year. We are in the last year of the treaty and once the days are crossed off someone will attack. Fanan will regain his power.”

“And you need me to…” I trailed off.

“Stop it. I believe when Fanan is stopped, Ebos will be whole.” A ghost of a smile trailed across his lips. “There will be peace.”

“You said it. I’m scrawny, I have no powers or fancy swords like you three do.”

“No you don’t,” he said grimly. “I beg the gods you are something more than I’d hope.”

I shifted uncomfortably as a thought crossed my mind. “What if the kings refuse to unite their kingdoms?”

“Then the Biafra will have no choice,” he said. “Regions will fight with us to ensure what we have worked doesn’t exhaust into flames.”

“So what are you. Biafra’s?”

“We are the breath of Heads. The secret society the prince calls his own.” No wonder they had a stand, they had great power supporting them. “Only few know about us, hence the name secret society. Our origin sprung from the course of the prince to unite the kingdoms once again. Years before now when the prince was much younger, he watched his own mother fall ill and wither away slowly. Her once bright eyes dimmed and her body were bones and no flesh. It was something our Ezemor could not cure. It was rare. The only person who could have seen a disease like it was on the other side.”

“Tails.”

He nodded. “The king refused to let go of his pride,” he said flinging the stick down hard. “She died soon. He wanted nobody else to feel the same pains he did and when he rises up as king, he promises to set things right.”

I said nothing. He told the story like it was his own, his face stony with anger, not everyone could do that. How many people did the division affect? How many had to lose their lives because of the wickedness of man?

After a moment Azuka said. “None of this would have happened if our people learned to control their greed.”

“What about Fanan. Who is he?”

He leaned against his knees, stroking the fire. “It was always possible to defeat our enemies but not Fanan.”

“Why not Fanan.”

“Because he’s dead,” said Azuka dryly. “Dead long before every tree around us grew. He wanted power and got it. Drove him mad, killed dozens, children for their blood. His parents were afraid so they had him set on fire to burn but you know evil never dies.”

“How is that possible?”

“What’s not. The Ezemor of that time was infused with dark magic. Had him sealed under for years. My grandfather was a weak king, so weak the regent at his side, a human was his mouth piece. His wife refused to trust this regent believing he possessed too much power when it wasn’t a humans turn to rule. The king trusted him so much, he waved off his wife’s warning.”

“She was right.”

“She was. The regent had set up armies to raid the palace. Some transcendent were on his side, they saw him as the true king. That was how they were able to infiltrate, killing dozens, thousands of Transcendent who fought back. The King had no choice but to break the seal and let Fanan save his people trading his own life.”

“Did he not know the true story of Fanan.”

“He did. But his people came first. When Fanan was released, I could sense the blood thirsty nature in the atmosphere and I was just a little boy then. I was told I was lucky not to have witness it. A new king rose not long after, announcing the division.”

“Did the king Emeka have a plan?”

“He was weak not stupid. He had a child made from bloods and rituals.”

“Is that possible?” I asked.

“Yes, it was. Don’t worry, you will meet the child maker soon enough. He will explain much better.”

“You explain,” I said. “Are you trying to say I was made?”

Azuka stood up. “Yes and no. The truth is I don’t know. I thought, still think it was impossible like you are thinking now. What choice do I have when Fanan will regain his full strenght after the red moon.”

“I thought it was after the treaty.”

“That’s when the treaty ends.”

I didn’t ask who the maker was. I was tired of asking questions whose answers only left me with more to ask and confused. I stood up. “Where are you going to sleep?”

He looked astounded. “I don’t see how its any of your business. Are you scared?”

I rubbed my arms, trying shave the chill coming over me. “No?” I said quietly.

He glanced at me and then to Chibuzor still by the none existent fire. It had burned off while we talked.

He smiled crookedly. “Obi’m will stay with you.”

“Obi’m?” I watched him disappear behind the carriage and soon afterward I heard a hiss. An embodiment of green scaly skin in its sweetness of its hissing lullaby. How had I forgotten about his snake? And it was cruel for him to think I’d get shut eyes with a reptile bask in golden ray eyes meters away. I felt he knew what he did, bet he knew I’d be scared out of my wit.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The night passed slower than I imagined, mainly because I was awake most of the time. Morning came with cramps and cold feet, my buttocks feeling like heavy stones. The breakfast was more fishes, a brief trip to the stream to wash and drink, then back to the carriage. I stood with the rest of the Biafra's as Azuka mentioned all of the time, avoiding the snake who strangely had found liking to me. Luckily its owner picked it in no time, placing in on the roof of the carriage; no wonder I hadn't noticed it prior to the previous night.

The remaining hours passed in a blur and soon enough we rode skiing down a sloppy path with a sign board pressed against stones; HEADS. There was a massive gate of plantain peels stacked on each other and high-linked walls of the same type. Ten guard with tight nit wrappers across his shoulders stationed in front. No one needed to tell me to bend my head and hide.

Behind those walls was where Hanye had been taken. Behind the same walls was where the four of us were planning to go to to steal to our fill. We might have gotten as far as the tickets could carry us and I was sure it was outside the walls, not beyond. The place was tightly guarded to protect their people and the properties within. Heads have been known to be a wealthy kind of village, with bronze sculptures and gold, the tent was proof. If one managed to take stray cowries as bribe, what about the other nine? I believed not everyone was willing to compromise their life or their families for pieces if not bags of what could not preserve their dignity when they are caught.

Hanye and I once tried entering the palace as new servants for the king, disguised with waist beads and wrappers above our knees, but we were caught and we'd been beaten with planks if we were much older. And to tell we never tried again was never a surprise to anyone we told the story, not that it was told to anyone in particular.

The carriage stopped and new voices were heard. Two came over to Azuka's side in shitless faces, their eyes opened on seeing him wave. One of them called over his shoulders saying something I couldn't catch.

The gates swung open on one side, yet so wide the carriage would pass well enough. Despite the frugal look of the gates, it had scratched upon the dry cement, leaving perfect black lines in its wake. I let my head come up.

I didn't know what I expected to see, better houses, markets, roads, towns, something different from my village. I expected something like what was in the tent. I felt a twinge of dissatisfaction when we passed rickety shacks and palm wine joints whose roofs were wanting to kiss the muddy soil. Plantain trees were withered, and so were the people in the none existent markets. Where was the bronze and gold, I asked myself. It was like Tails, it was far worse. I imagined the look on Hanye's face if we had managed to bribe our way in, angry, disappointed, shocked, all the looks one could have when they saw something they never expected.

A cassava plantation was up ahead when we reached a line of houses bearing no doors nor windows. It spanned claiming land mass, spreading wide in spaces three markets would contain. I could see the leaves closer now; yellow and brown, bunches of harvested cassava though thin

like fingers laid abandoned on ridges. As we got to where I recognized as a village square, with benches and poles, I noticed the goats occupied the arena, their droppings on the dusty benches. The stream was brown and the fishes were still, belly up with no strain of life. Their death must have caused what smelt like rotten wood and dirty sailcloth.

“This is Heads?” I mumbled to myself.

We reached a road with branches leading to separate towns, their signs in front of each; Eyes, Mouth, Nose and Ears. To the right, we followed the one that read Eyes, coming down the sloppy path. We jerked on our seats and slammed into doors, unable to keep my grip, I fell ungracefully rearward, my nose painfully stimulated on the strong handles. Along my eye line, I could see in other villages, fast feet of heavily armed men, children and women colluding with hoes and Axes, swinging with shouts of wars. Some fell and I hoped not dead. I saw that they were attacking as groups. Powerful ice knives rose from the ground, and they attacked poised up and came down like its sharpness. It seemed it was being controlled.

“The King orders the people to leave their crops and house to train for war,” Kamfeechi said. It answered the reason for the emptiness in the markets and squares

“But why children?”

“To grow up strong.”

There was a stop moment when the slope became straight, then leading to a curve into zigzag lines and we approached another gate. Kamfeechi climbed down saying something about the piled up work he had to take care off. At this gate, we entered once with no guards manning the entrance. Everywhere was what I imagined Heads to be, clean water ponds harbored healthy fishes, a central force of beautiful rowed palm trees stirred the way to high mud houses with feather signs, better looking than the ones out in the towns. Short cemented poles held lanterns giving its light to the spots the palms would not let the sun shine. Maiden roam the surrounding in the little buildings, holding leaves of food in calabash’s and some with struggling fishes they might have gotten from the pond.

“What do you think?” Azuka asked.

“It’s so different from the towns outside.”

“That’s because we’re in the palace.”

I glanced behind me, wanting to get another look of the striking contrast of the places but the gates were already closing by the guards from inside. No wonder I hadn’t noticed them, they were inside. I was forced into believing Heads had no true ruler, because what king would allow its people to suffer in the slump they lived while he was basked in comfort of his home.

“This is not what I was expecting. And to think Hanye and I wanted to come.”

He looked at me, a little smile playing on his lips. “You two were in for a shocking surprise,” he said.

“But why is the... the king not doing anything?” I said carefully.

It took him a while to answer like what he was searching for the right words to say. “When Fanan has control, no one can say otherwise.”

“Then that would mean...”



He nodded. "He is controlling the king or he is the king. If not, somewhere close."

Hairs on my arms rose to an inch and my scalp had its own beat. If the king was truly controlled by Fanan, it meant Hanye was somewhere close to the King. But how would I get close to the king, especially when I was human. He would sniff me out like a decayed rat.

When we emerged at the entrance of the main castle, we were diverted to where an arch stood. It loomed over us in its enormous structure as we dived deeper and deeper, and away from the castle. The place was like a desert no trees, just red sand and the high increase of the temperature. About three minutes to entry, I looked left and right and there were shacks with men casting by melting copper and tin. Beads dangled when they worked, sweat dripping into the melted mixture.

"Why don't they use their powers to lessen the work?"

"Not everyone can carry the weight of magic. Some are born with little, others not at all."

A building came up front and it was nothing I had ever seen. The Main castle might have been grander but I hadn't seen that, this one blew me away. It was small and beautified with Nsibidi letters carefully inscribed on the surface, rising with trees surrounding it like something molded out of golden sands. Growing closer and closer, I noticed raffia mats and the swollen pillars which seemed like pregnant women attack its cardinal points, facing inside and out.

"This is the prince's castle. Anyone rarely comes up here, including the king," Azuka said lowering himself, digging his hands under his seat. What he pulled was in many colors, in a shape; upside down and upright triangles hand knitted to the teeth. He fanned it over his face and threw it at me. "Wouldn't what anyone figuring out what you are?"

I felt a surge of annoyance, hating the way he treated me. The territory was his, how could I complain. Warm material melted on my face covering me whole and almost blindly, tiny hole left just enough space for me to breathe and see.

Turning a corner, the carriage pulled to a final stop. Maidens and male servants ran to the carriage, their beads bouncing ridiculously on their slender hips and necks. One of them pulled open the carriage and another going over to Azuka's side. As I came down cautiously trying to avoid a graceless fall, I noticed the cluster of maidens watching me. The look of unfamiliarity registered on their faces, taking their time to scrutinize me from top to bottom. Chibuzor and Zinachidinma dismounted, and two male guards rushed to take their horses, while I was led to the entrance.

For a moment, everyone stood still, doing something I'd never expect. Knees were placed to the ground, heads bent to their chests as they said in shocking unison. "Welcome my prince." I knew what it was it was. It was a form of respect anyone gave to somebody of higher status; kings, queens, princes, princesses. I couldn't resist the urge to look to the direction of their bow, and do the same if need be. I stared.

How many times must I have my heart wrenched out of my chest, and how many times must my body feel rigid? I didn't know, I thought. This boy had been with us, the words he told me behind the fire yesterday was a good giveaway. I never questioned why he always sat in the carriage, or have his words above the others. He was right again, I wasn't that smart. Knowing

Azuka's true status, I noticed his eyes were sharp, smooth beautiful skin, and clear eyes that glimmered from pride and wisdom.

"You may rise and go back to your place," he said in a commanding tone. "We shall see ourselves in alone."

As we passed the still kneeling servants, the entryway reeked of juju, and was hung on walls with vascular bronze carvings. Inside was huge, a vast cavernous space that looked less like it was built from bare hands and more like magic had hollowed the grounds to bring out the best of soils. Through half open door, I glimpsed countless of identical rooms each possessing a bed, heightened shelves and bamboo study sets. I pulled the cloth on my face before we curved into a triangular shaped courtyard, where miniature houses with thatch protectors bore lights, shining on the doors. They had eyes carved into the frames at the middle and a hexagon designed above and below.

We went for the one straight ahead. The light was blinding.

Azuka who was leading took his pair aside and spoke to them in hushed tones. They latter bowed and left.

"Why didn't you tell me you were the prince?"

"Wasn't important."

"At least..."

He stepped in front of me cutting me off and pushed the door wide open. Azuka had said so many things that night, yet said so little, what else was he keeping from me, Zinachidinma was not his betrothed?

I guess I must have said it out loud because he said, "Zinachidinma is not my betrothed. I just made it up. And you looked like a fool for believing."

"You made me look like a fool."

He nodded inside the room. "This is where you will be staying. As long as you do not leave, we can keep our heads."

I registered the medium sized room, a fire burring at the corner, gold rods held up Akwete curtains and a large bed stood at the center calling me to take a nap. Truly, I hadn't slept last night, a rest of my head now wouldn't be too bad.

Azuka sighed. "Listen Kamsie. I will help you find your friend as long as you help us with Fanan."

"Technically, I cannot find Fanan without you helping me with Hanye."

He smiled strolling until he came up to my face. "I don't like you very much," he whispered. His breath hot against my skin.

I blinked. "I'm glad because I don't like you too."

"You should be on the watch Kamsie. I bet he already knows you're here." He gave me a small smirk and strode away.

I huffed and entered, slamming the door hard. The audacity. If he weren't so much of a prince I could have smacked him across his face until it stung. As much as he made me scream on the inside, I took to mind his warming, locking the doors.

When my head touched the bed, I was off to dreamland.

## CHAPTER NINE

Waking up to the faint sounds of cock crows, I blocked out the beaming lights shining in from the windows. I had forgotten to close the shutters before I went to bed. I hadn't dreamt of anything that signified the violence I experienced in the last couple of days; it was occupied with the usual singing of a smoothened lullaby. It'd been long since I heard it. The woman in white was cradling me in the basket, her lips were drawn in a beautiful smile while she sang the song, blossoming in my heart. They were all I could see of her face, the lips in black. White beads were dangling on her neck, attracting my chubby fingers and I got hold of it pulling them to myself. She stopped singing before the point I always hummed to laugh at my attempt to take her necklaces for myself. *Baby baby, I'm sorry you had to go this way but a day will come when you shall return.*

A bird flew in, zooming across the room, heading for the door which stood open, slowly swinging. I closed it, locked it, I thought. My heart thundered in my chest, and I looked around for signs someone had entered without my notice. I wouldn't blame myself for not noticing the door when it squeaked, my body was dead tired from the journey and it still was, achy and felt raw. Still I'd hope nobody poked in their noses to take a sneak peek of the prince's new visitor. Hanye always pulled this kind of tricks on me, funny and annoying at the same time and I'd always fall for it. When I would gather my courage to step to the door, she would jump out with a yell. Those were the good days, I couldn't wait until we went back to it.

Swinging my legs off the bed with haste, I knocked down piles of materials. For a moment I tried to remember if I had slept with them. When nothing came to me, I picked it up; they were wrappers in a set and they looked new, crispy and crest.

"Morning to you," a familiar voice said.

I looked up at bit to quickly and my head spun. Hazy images attacked my vision and promptly, my body moved on its own and I fell back on the bed.

"I honestly don't have time for this," the voice snapped.

"Is she dead Zina?" another voice said sceptically. "She looks like she isn't going to wake up."

"I wish she would." A sigh. "But we can't always get what we want."

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I was drowning, submerged in a large body of water. I couldn't breathe. My head was being pushed down with hands more than one while I struggled to come up in order to breathe.

I bolted awake and my eyes felt like it was sewed shut. Blinking away painful liquids, I saw Zina holding a pile of water tilted to my face. I wanted to jump up and away from her but I was a second too late; she poured it directly on my face and I thought I saw particles. Swiping hysterically my hands over my head, I sprung up and bent over, banging my fists on my chest.

"I... awake," I said, fighting away what fell into my mouth.

"I know. Cleaning water shouldn't go to waste," Zina said. "Especially if you looked like it."

My cheeks flared. And if I were light skinned it would have burnt. The stream should have actively cleaned my wound but I'd guess my clothes resembled rags and bore stains like poops. Involuntary, I ran my fingers on my hair, trying to smoothen out the strays which must have found their way out to create messy strings.

"It's no use. He wouldn't like what he sees."

I wanted to ask who she was referring to but she was already moving away from me to the maid silently watching. Zinachidinma, threw the pail at the corner and walked passed the maid and out of the door. I must have looked confused because the maid said; "The bath is outside."

Outside? Where people would see me, a human among their midst.

"Don't worry, maidens attend to the king at noon," she added quickly. Just how long had I slept that it was noon already.

I couldn't help but stare at the girl in orange Akwete. "You're a maiden too, aren't you?"

She shrugged and said nothing.

Zina was barking orders at the maiden even before she entered. "Take her to the bath. We have no time to waste."

"No time for what?" I asked but it seemed my question flew only halfway a thread.

"The black soap cleans better. Now quickly," Zina said. "Before he arrives."

They attacked me from two sides, tugging on my tunic until I heard a rip. From the drag, a piece touched my back and I hissed, feeling again the nasty sign my wound hadn't healed.

I tried to stop them. "Wait a minute." I spun away from their grip but I simply heard another rip. "Wait. Stop."

They continued fully removing the materials that kept me shielded. There was a moment of astonished silence within me as I sat bare in front of people I didn't know. Then I yelled. "Where are we going? Who do we have to see? Leave me alone!" I gathered my strength and ducked in between the tight space separating the females. By the time I was free, I felt all my injuries busting open from the inside once again.

Zina's eyes were angry and I raised my hands warily.

"Do you..."

"Wait a minute will you?" I ordered. "You cannot barge into someone's room and force them bare? No one does that."

"It was ordered..."

"I'm not a child." I stepped away from the door in case someone passed. "And I can bath myself."

"Kamsie," said Zina. The soft tone registering in her tone made me think she didn't have a choice. I turned and looked at her across the room. I thought how odd it was that the girl few days back was looking drained and worn out, if possible she looked worse than I did. And yet, she had all these energy within her when my body still felt stiff. Well, she didn't get caught up in an attack like I did. "The Ezemor is arriving in a few hours and we have to dress you in a

presentable way. He is special. He is a seerer and what looks worse than his shrine is not worth looking at.”

“I can just...” I began and trailed off. I knew what Ezemor’s were; spiritual beings, intercessors, but they people I hadn’t seen before, because Tail’s didn’t have them anymore. Without leaving an heir to pass down his power of speaking to the gods, the last one disappeared into dust when he professed the wrong fortune to the king. It was what the warden had told us during one of her teachings.

“Kamfeechi wrote to him and today was the day he set for your meeting,” she said. “And we wouldn’t want to upset either of them, especially the prince whose hopes are high.” It hadn’t dawned on me yet that Azuka was the prince of Heads. Zina didn’t move towards me but watched from across the room with a snakes piercing stillness. She was waiting for me to make my move. But I knew if I didn’t go to her, she would bundle me into the bath she drew. And where would I run to if not her, I was not with clothes.

“I will bath myself,” I said airily. It seemed like she wanted to protest, her mouth already open. “I’ll scream if you don’t let me.”

“Fine,” she muttered in defeat. “Look, I’d better go tell the others I left you to change.” She added. “And I hope you get the places to wash right.”

I glared.

I cleaned up in the small bathroom. The water was warm against my skin as I merged it with the Ncha Nkota leaving faint fragrance of cocoa powder floating. Drying myself with the wrapper I had previously knocked over and covered myself with, strings from my woolly hair stuck to the animal designs. I squinted at my reflection on one of the status to see if I could make out anything of my appearance. There was a brown face staring back, my reflection nothing but a disfigured version.

A banging kind of knock came and the door was tried. Fortunately, the desk I had placed to keep out intruders was pushing back whoever was on the other side.

“Open. Now,” Zina yelled. “I will...”

“I’m coming,” I shouted. “I’m coming.” The knocking continued. I clenched my wrapper closer to my skin and stumbled to the door. “What do you want again?”

“If you plan to see him the way you are, I’ll leave at once,” she snapped and I could see from the small opening her unkind sneer.

I shrugged. The wrapper didn’t look to bad on me, and I was positive they had women in it only and nothing else. But I thought, I wasn’t like them, I would draw unwanted attention to myself.

I had barely moved the desk aside when the door flew open throwing me off my heels and the girl accompanied with the maiden as before, carrying a pile of clothes and coral sitting on top in its glamour. Coral were easily the finest accessories of the royalties, with its magnified rich brown beads like earth which spoke to the soul and body. It looked like it weighed a ton when it

was let down with the pile, the antique never moving and always still.

“I have to wear all these? It’ll weigh me down.”

Zina said nothing and clapped her hands. The maiden ran out and Zina separated the beads from the pile of red cloth. I watched warily at her action. Sewn on them were broken calabash's, and squiggly drawings made from a vast variety of native chalks.

A huff came from outside accompanied with the maiden pulling in an elaborately decorated stool with her behind.

“Hands up,” Zina commanded. I frowned at her tone but I obeyed.

She undid the wrapper muttering with shakes of her head how I used the sheets for my bed as a towel to rid my body of water. It wasn’t long before I was bare again. I was uncomfortable with her measuring looks when she went forth, matching the clothings to see if it was going to fit. It didn’t, at least it seemed like it to me.

It looked ridiculous.

My slender body was swimming in it and I had to roll the waist up of the skirt several times before it stopped falling, and the dropping neck line of the shirt emphasized my neck bones showing my lack of proper meal. I felt air on my back, at the very tip of my bruise and I knew the back was low too.

Zina pushed me down and I thought I was going to fall. A hard surface kissed my bottom, and I jerked on the meet.

She took the beads in her hands. I didn’t have the time to question her further because she ordered with a nod for the maiden to take my head, and the corals were placed on my neck. I was right, it weighed a ton. I felt thousands of blocks tangled on a string to make me suffer.

I clenched my hands into fists to keep me from reaping the corals apart. Then Zina stepped back and examined my tear-less cry. She twirled once with her eyes closed, her heels raise until she was on her tippy toes. I watched her with a questioning gaze, unable to tell what she was trying to do. By the time she stopped and her eyes open, the weight receded and there was a kind of soft tightening not caused by the corals but by the neckline of the shirt.

“What did you do?” I asked as I started to stand. The waist of my skirt was my size and when I had risen enough to fully grasp the new changes, the maiden pulled me back down.

“Don’t you dare stand till she tells you to.”

“But...”

“I have more adjustments to make you look more.” Zina took a while to stare. “More acceptable,” Zina finished before walking over to me.

“I’m sure I look better...”

“Not without my help,” she said.

“What more do you want to add?”

Zina made a face. “Some markings.”

“That’s not an answer.” I was starting to get irritated with her attitude. “You keep avoiding my questions.”

“Look I don’t have time...”

“Start explaining then!” I snapped. “Why did you twirl like you were high on herbs? What markings are you takings about? Give me something I can work with.”

She was gripping her nose as if trying to take out something from it. “I heard Azuka...” The maiden gasped and Zina replied with a nasty glance. “Prince Azuka explaining about our people’s powers.”

I nodded. “Some have little and some have none.”

“I have that little.”

“You sew? No hands?”

“Adjust,” said Zina. “Someday I’d create better than what you wear. Have I answered you question now?”

“The markings.”

Zina exhaled. “Right.” She held a hand up to her face. “Face markings are a necessity for Ezemor’s people. No one will question you if you don’t posses bright skin like us. As long as you bare the markings, you’ll be assumed to have been called by him.”

“But your maiden might spill,” I began. “I’m not one of...”

“Kamsie.” Zina gave me a warning look, cutting me off before I finished my words. Then she launched into a recital of objects, the maidens handed to her. “Knives are better at this and Ash will lessen the bleeding.”

I was sure I had gone very pale. Remember Kamsie, you are doing this to for Hanye. You can save Hanye with this.

I squeaked as my head was yanked back and furiously was held down. Zina came into view, taking a hold of my chin. She turned it left and right, I could see from her eyes, she was searching for better place to give me the mark. Finally, my head was turned to the windows where chickens were feeding within grasses. Filling my mind with the birds as they strode the fields like if it were theirs, feeding on worms from the earth, I was able to take my attention off the warm breath on my skin and the pickling sensation of the knife tip.

It took long minutes before she let go. Surprisingly, the pains reduced to itchy tings and I moved my cheeks to help me get a good scratch but it did nothing, making it worse. I raise my hands to scratch, and it was batted down with a slap.

Zina hissed. “Don’t touch.”

“It won’t make a difference.”

“But you’ll die from excess bleeding.”

I crossed my arms and huffed, trying to work my cheeks again to get the itch.

Zina stepped back. “It looks good on you.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

Zina walked to the bed and sat. “Azuka...” The maiden gasped again and Zina rolled her eyes. “Prince Azuka wants everything to go well this time.”

“This time?”

She gave a sigh. “They’d been more before you,” she said. “All failures. He bet his life on you to be right.”



“What if I’m not?” I deadpanned. What if I really wasn’t the person they were looking for and a sham like the others.

She smiled sadly. “I really don’t know,” she said. “He’ll believe his efforts had gone to waste. He’ll blame himself like how he’s already doing when he first saw you.” Although her words stung like bees, the tone she used was light and when she said it, her eyes were long gone. Whatever she knew the prince felt, she felt just the same. I was taken back to when I noticed their encounters, she had always worn a mask shielding the hurt brilliant on her face when he ignored her or avoided her touch. And not to forget his truth he confirmed was a lie about her being his betrothed.

“Are you his betrothed?”

“The King expects him to marry someone of worth and high status like the children of his courts.”

“And him?”

“Stopping the impending war after the treaty is what’s important.”

“Not to you.”

“As a member of the Biafra, I do what he says. Nothing else.”

“You want something...”

“I’m not obliged to answer these sought of questions.”

I looked at the maiden. “Is she really meant to be here?”

Zina shrugged. “You die knowing the secrets of the court. Spilling gets you beheaded before the whole gist gets out in the open.”

My stomach churned and spun when I remembered the girl at the Canal. The severing of her organs was nothing compared to the slick chop of a head, even though I hadn’t seen for myself. I let my mind relax. I imagined myself spilling ink on the bamboo leaves, with Hanye beside me making faces at my miss-pelt and meaningless words.

Then, my cheeks flared when my stomach rumbled. I thought longingly for Oha soups.

“We should get going. He’ll be here in no time now.”

They hurried me out of the room in all sought of pushes and pulls. And through the same way we went through. Half expecting Azuka to be by the entrance in his usual blank demeanor, a rigid old man in red to his place.

## CHAPTER TEN

It took me a second, just a second for my lips to release a surprise gasp. It was strange that no one else did the same. The air around him was moist, above the clouds darkened- unusual for a tentative morning. The sun lit only by the milky glow that filtered down one of the stray clouds not yet affected by his cold demeanor. The black bird on his shoulder crowed like a hungry chicken, its feathers being the only thing bearing the morning glow. For a moment, it felt like I was the only one in the strange space; that Zina had possibly left me alone to till by myself. Then I saw a figure coming out from behind me to stay by another under an umbrella shade. In a knee length Isiagu, feather filled red cap, Azuka sat leg crossed behind the bamboo shove, his eyes shining from reflections.

The short man in vest and beaded wrapper falling heavily on his ankle, and a feathered red cap turned around digging his tall stick which giggled with palms and pieces of cloth. I stand corrected about the bird- his mouth produced the continuous crows no ordinary person could make but the feathers I'd seen were real, just not belonging to a living bird. He walked closer in small strides and his feet themselves were decorated with dots from the natural color of clouds and the intricate designers of his beads were bantered with what seemed like strips of animal blood.

"May the gods be praised," Azuka said. "This is the girl."

The man came closer, still jiggling his stick, dragging his bare legs on the sands- uneven lines were left behind. I wouldn't lie and say my heart hammered in my chest out of fear, rather it broke into unrecoverable pieces. There was something strange I noticed about his swaying movements, his eyes gifted with pounds of sleep crust and dry gunk. They were silents dots staring straight, never blinking, never searching, just empty like waterless ponds. Even then I noticed his head slightly tilted upwards, and I supposed he was meant to be looking at me. A slow burning smell floated around him, like charcoal and incense, there was a bit of rotten bird too thrown into the mix.

"And this, Kamsie," Azuka said, standing from his seat, "is Okirikiri Obodo from the city of the nose."

The face bent his head to face me squarely- I was beginning to question the quality of his sight. Hanye would have made jest about the whole thing.

There was silent and if I hadn't viewed Kamfeechi in the shadow bent against his knees, the silence would have remained. Immediately, I replicated the gesture.

"Otuto diri chi. May the gods really be praised," Okirikiri said, tone light like the passing wind. "O bu ya bu otu. She is the one we seek."

Kamfeechi rose. "I knew she was it," he said. Azuka shrugged but a ghost of a smile played at the corners of his lips.

"The Orator delivered the well deserved note and I received it with pleasure. It's a must to find her strength before the rise of the red moon. Ndu anyi na- adabere na ya."

I said nothing. It didn't surprise me, nothing really did anymore after the series of

experiences I went through. The warden, or what seemed like the warden said mentioned something about the red moon. I needed to go the Fanan before it rises. Of course I knew finding the strength within me was primary. But who was going to do it for me, the blind man? I bet he could get back to his home without extra help.

Okirikiri was still staring at me, his expression blank almost resembling baby leaves. Then he touched me without warning, a surge of electricity bust within me and I fell back, scrambling on my knees to the nearest wall. My brains ticked with a feeling it had be touched with bare hands, the ones still stretch forth where I left them. I could feel the last string of rapid current somewhere on the inside, refusing to leave and finding its way to my chest. Heart wanted to explode from the fiery pit it was dropped in, sauced and garnished, I whizzed unable to sustain a stable breath.

“Where was she found?” Okirikiri asked.

“In tails as you said wise one,” Azuka answered and added quickly. “Unconscious.”

“Dozie fulfilled his mission and died an honorable death. Long live King Emeka he screamed,” said Okirikiri and unexpectedly he yelled. “Ha!”

“He had given the baby off well,” Kamfeechi said.

Okirikiri began fidgeting, raising himself on the tip of his toes. It surprised me how he could sustain himself that high, being the oldest man I’d ever seen. He was an old coot, spotting wrinkles of confused seams and light grays around his chin. “Okirikiri kia ne ku, Okirikiri kia ne ku, Okirikiri kia ne ku,” he chanted, jiggling again his stick. When he transited into an endless twirl, it was as if it was the only thing his body truly knew how to do. He could shrink in height and rise with length. No matter how fast he spun, his balance never relented. “Okirikiri kia ne ku, Okirikiri kia ne ku, Okirikiri kia ne ku.”

From my crouched state, I watched in confusion. So, this was an Ezemor.

He slowed his spin, and finally came to a soft bounce, jiggling his stick once more. “Okirikiri Kia ne ku. The birthless child is called to...”

“Why are you calling me birthless?” I said, searching in vain for answers within his eyes. “Do you know my parents?”

“Interruptions are unnecessary,” Azuka scolded. “Let him finish.”

“Let her be. You can’t blame her for wanting to know the truth,” Kamfeechi explained.

“You defend her because she’s like you,” said Azuka.

Okirikiri changed his hop to another foot. “It is not her fault she questions for the truth. The forbidden was done and she questions it so.” There was no emotion when he talked, so it was unable to know if he disapproved of my question. “From the death you were created, infused with broken bones of the one I shall not name. You serve us all. It’s your fate.”

“The one you shall not name,” I murmured. “Hold on. There’s something I don’t understand. Are you trying to tell me that someone created me?”

“Fresh from still bodies,” Okirikiri answers.

“How-”

“Dark magic holds more than you know child. It kills, the war. It heals, you,” said Okirikiri.

“Then heal all of Ebos with it!”

“My father destroyed it when he took the throne,” Azuka said. “He was afraid, everyone was afraid of what it could do. Burnt the book to ashes.”

“This is stupid.” I couldn’t believe I was listening to the trash they sprouted from their lips. “I’ve imagined my life with my father, waiting everyday with my basket in my hands. Waiting for him to write. And now you tell me I was made from death!”

“Infused with broken bones Child,” Okirikiri completed.

“I’m not your child!”

“But you are. You are indeed.”

I said nothing. My bottom felt numb on the ground. The whole thing seemed so unlikely. I tried to picture the old man picking up scraps of bones from grave sites, and taking them back to his shine or whatever he named it. Words like drools would drip from his lip when he reads from the book of dark magic. I imagined the bones in rolls, circle and all the shape I knew coming together in earsplitting cracks to create the baby me.

“Okirikiri perfected the creation process after many fails. Some died and the only one who came close to the real thing was far too aged,” said Kamfeechi. “Lost to the cause. I had to join in when the prince sought me out.”

“It was the same for the others,” said Azuka, there was an edge in his voice. “Everyone has their story to tell.”

“Expect me,” I said, having the same edge in my voice. “My whole life’s been a lie. Where do I start?”

“You start from somewhere,” said Azuka.

I turned to him, my vision clouded in a mixture of anger and anguish. “Darn you! Darn you all if you thing life is just going to-”

“Enough!” Okirikiri interrupted. “It’s not a matter of choice. It’s truth and fate.”

“You know I can run from this.”

“I heard Fanan has your friend,” said Okirikiri reminding me I hadn’t much of a say. It was a low blow and he knew it. “You are weak and can do nothing against a powerful being.”

For the first time, he let himself show an expression, not happy nor sad but it was something. There was a wishful look in the way he stared like he was reliving a painful past, perhaps something that had to do with his lost sight. With a quick jiggle of his stick, his bounce stopped.

“There is something inside of her but it sleeps. It needs to be awoken so that it can breath. I will give you some time to digest what was revealed but you have to see me by tomorrow’s end so we can start.”

I was biting my lips, unaffected by the solider ant making its way up my skirt. “And if there’s nothing?”

“There is something child. I felt it like currents passing through a large body of water,” he said coming up to me in long strides. The smell of charcoal and incense was deeper now and in filled my nostrils in a kind of chocking sensation. He lowered himself to my height and stared me straight in the face. “More questions lies within you. I’ll answer those when you come.”

His emanating scent receded and was already gone before I registered his last words. "Wait!" "It's no use," said Azuka. "He's gone."

"I want to know more. HE CAN'T JUST LEAVE," I said slowly getting to my feet. There was nothing to see in the empty region expect for passing guards throwing curious glances every now and then.

"Kamsie," said Kamfeechi in a gentle tone. "I understand how you feel. It's not easy. Trust me I know."

"No you don't know."

I glanced around searching for the slightest of all signs to tell me where my supposed creator went. The sand was pushed in at some point, I could make out thin footsteps heading east. Gathering the ruffles of my skirt, I was making my way to where the footsteps led.

"Kamsie," Azuka said. It was the first time he had called my name, sounding so foreign. "Go back in."

I ignored him. Feverishly, my foot collides with a stray stone, and it hurt. My left toe was a goner now. I released a strangled cry when I fell forward and I was down halfway when callused hands touched me. I didn't thank him, only beating them away. "Leave me alone."

"Stop that." Azuka took hold of me tightly and hauled me towards him. "You need to calm down."

"Take a hike," I said, struggling to set my arm free. "Let go."

"No," he said blankly, yanking me closer.

"You don't act very much as a prince," I said, this time clawing with my nails. My ear caught a gasp in the distance, but I was too busy to see if it had come from the maiden.

"And you act nothing like a lady." He was angry, the veins in his head protruding and teeth gritted tight.

Rage flooded within me, insides boiling with extremely hot air. Without much to think about, I stuck out my free arm, struck his cheek hard and pushed him away. He jerked back in surprise, eyes wide like saucers. Deep down, I regretted it. It's never been heard for a commoner to strike royalty but then, he caused it for himself.

I ran, following the footsteps.

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Luckily, Okirikiri was still within the vicinity. He was making silent and precise movements to the entrance, and if I had been a little late he'll be gone. Under the trees giving a rabbit looking shade on the ground which were warm and cozy, I went hastening my steps.

"Wait," I called. "Wait a minute."

I saw him sway to a stop and turn. My breathing was labored when I closed distance, and moved towards him. "Do it. Find my strength and answer my questions."

He marked me with his silent gaze and nothing fell from his lips. He raised his thin fingers to my cheeks incurring in me once again the blazing current. They were squeezed resembling sun dried meat and cold as ice. "Very well then," he said.

I went with him alone, not know what I set myself in for.

\*\*\*

The city of nose was similar to what I'd seen when we entered Heads; dilapidated roofs, rotten water and dead fishes. We went through the edges of the lake, over grown weeds paving the pathway to the opening of a farm yard. I glanced at the littlest number of people I'd seen, men and women performing mundane duties and they were in sacks, worn in place of wrappers. Their hoes were tilling the grounds, where unclean water from the lake passed through the farm yard. They didn't raised their heads when we passed.

The leaves of the plants were dried, some falling when I grew closer. I pitied the plants and I wanted to help water them to slight growth. Quickly, I bent over the flowing line.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I looked up. "I'm not coming with you," I said. He was standing over me looking cool like a prince he was. Ignoring him, I stretched my hands forward.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he repeated.

"Leave me alone."

I saw his shadow shrug. "Blood might just look beautiful on your skin." He stepped away.

"What!" Suddenly, I came up. Azuka was drawing closer to Okirikiri up ahead, oblivious to what was happening behind. "Hold on," I called, matching up to his steps.

"Are you done?"

I shook my head. "What did you mean by blood might look beautiful on my skin."

"The water's mixed with blood that's what."

"From where?"

It took him sometime to answer. "You's."

"I don't think that's an answer," I said sarcastically.

"I suppose when stray humans are found, in or out, their blood flows with the water."

I gulped. "Human's are killed and thrown in?"

He grinned. "Something like that."

I wondered if the four of us would have been killed and thrown in as well. Our blood flowing in the lines while farmers tilled with their equipments. Maybe, the lake might bear a thicker shade of red or be the same.

"You know what? I'm starting to think you like it."

"I don't-"

"You smiled."

Azuka thought about it. "I did but not because I'm some sick monster who enjoys blood," he said. "I imagined about what the kingdoms are doing to themselves by wrenching breadwinners, mothers, children away from their families."

"And that's funny?"

"Smiles are needed sometimes. Even when their's pain."

The moment where he told me about his mother and how she died dawned on me. He had been a victim of this madness. And he mentioned the others Biafra's; Zinachidinma and Chibuzor

having their own stories. Did the war affect them as well?

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Smacking you earlier. I don’t think you deserved it.”

Shaking his head, he regarded the heavens with a short laugh. “She tells me sorry but never thank you.”

I couldn’t control the words that came out next, “Shut up.” My hands flew to my mouth in shock and a mumbled ‘sorry’ was muffled underneath.

“Sometime I wish you could be smarter than your reflexes,” he said and I noticed he hadn’t taken it to heart.

“And I’d wish you’ll not be so infuriating,” I replied. I expected him to give me a nasty reply, but there was gentleness in his expression reminding me he was as young as I was. In my opinion, he didn’t look so bad but regarding his personality, I really didn’t know. He changed much compared to the first time we met, looking more relaxed like a weight was taken off his shoulders. This was the boy who was going to rule all of heads and maybe all of Ebos if his plans worked out fine. I blinked throwing me back to reality.

“What are you plans?”

“Find Fanan and destroy him.”

“You mentioned earlier you think it’s the king,” I said. “Your father.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was only pulling your legs. My father might be,” he paused.

“Something but he certainly isn’t Fanan.”

“You do enjoy playing with me.”

He shrugged and said nothing. I rolled my eyes.

We went on ahead in silence. I almost stepped in a pond of snake and certainly could have died from a number of deadly bites if Azuka had not pulled me away in time. There were ruffles from behind us made by the snakes accompanied by earsplitting hisses. I blamed him when they continued to follow us; he liked snakes, I’m sure they sensed that. I tensed, worried they might come on to us faster than I walked and I did briskly. Azuka, instead of matching my pace, stayed behind and stared with humorless grin. Okirikiri turned in a curved where multiple ornamental bells blackened by years rang in a never ending ring. Light sprinkles fell on me when I was under them, like morning dew and my shoulders bore the tinniest numbers of wet dots. Some watered my face and I felt I was walking though a white light. For a moment, I saw rushes of many street, carriages and a scream. It almost felt like the time we were attacked but I knew it was different. I didn’t know how.

I lost my balance and stumbled backwards. “What was that?” I asked weakly.

“We’re at the shrine.” Azuka said. “It’s always like this for first timers.”

I looked to him quietly and his lips were put in a crested fine line. “You feel it too?”

“People like us feel the intensity of spiritual beings working in the shrine...” Azuka just at the end of the sentence lets it hang loosely.

“Like us?”

“Zina. Chibuzor. Kamfeechi. There are special kinds of Transcendent,” he said. “It hurts to say they have their own share of rotten past.”

“Are there others?”

“None that I know of,” he said.

“Zina did something...”

“Zinachidinma is unique,” he answered, glancing at me. “More so than Chibuzor whose skill resembles mine but definitely not better.”

“Icy swords,” I said and he confirmed with a short nod. I ignored the image of Azuka handling the sword that scaled through me. He looked good then. “How unique is she?”

“The dangerous kind.”

“How?”

“When the war was at the tip of everyone’s noses, her parents met. A dark worshiper and a transcendent,” he said. “Never heard before.”

“Dark worshiper like Fanan.”

“There were followers of dark magic too, who wanted more than they could chew. When my father ordered the book to be destroyed, people of such were to go along with it. Zina was ten at the time, young and native.”

“Let me guess, you saved her.”

“I could have let the guards take care of her like they did her parents,” he said. “It took a lot of convincing to let my father let her stay.”

“What did you say?”

“Her powers could come in handy one day,” he said calmly, moving forward to a robed covered door with mud colored stains.

We emerged on a grassy patch, and a tree hid the afternoon sunlight. More robes decorated the tree, and I felt as if thousands of eyes were watching me from it.

“No wonder she likes you,” I whispered gently. “It all makes sense.”

Azuka looked at me blankly.

“In the room. It noticed it.”

“That’s too bad,” he said.

“You knew?”

“I’m not obliged to reciprocate things that don’t matter.”

“It will matter to her,” I said, thinking of Zina for whom had fallen for him.

He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll introduced her to one of those suitors who come around for the maidens.”

I looked to him quickly to see if he said it jokingly but he was expressionless.

“That’s evidence you see her less than a friend.”

“No. It means I take out trivial subjects out of the way.” His tone was sharp like the sword he yields. “Until I become King, protecting my kingdom from the likes of evil is what matters.”

I wanted to scold and tell him that it wasn’t the exact duty of someone his age. I knew stealing wasn’t the sought of job for a young child, at least I knew how to have fun. Hanye and I



planned for the future with our steals but it was not as serious as saving a kingdom. “Where is the fun in that?” I said jokingly, underlaying what I truly meant.

“I have responsibilities.”

“So...”

“We are here,” Okirikiri interrupted, cutting our conversation short.

“I hope you remember you wanted this now.”

How did he expect I would react to that? I had a slight feeling he expected me to be afraid.

I frowned at him. “What’s that suppose to mean?”

Azuka shrugged. “Don’t worry. It doesn’t hurt...much.”

I was not assured.

I looked at Okirikiri. He was chanting as he hopped at the entrance of a door less hut. He had let down his stick and switched to a palm frond he was using to beat his thatch roof. “Okirikiri kai ne ku, okirikiri kai ne ku. Ya puta uzor, ya puta uzor kai miri solu geme...” A faint glow registered inside like sunlight, prompting approaching footsteps to someone I couldn’t see. When the footsteps drew closer, I realized it was accompanied by light oja sounds, smoothing to the ear drum. It gave out a nice and cheery tone to my feet which started swaying a bit. A greasy young boy walked out, bubbles as cheeks, the oja placed on his mouth like a horn and his fingers working the body to effect his music. He was familiar.

As the boy cleared away from the entrance, the darkness within turned to a fiery light.

Slowly, I approached it with Azuka following closely behind. A set of fairly new raffia mats led the way deeper into the hut, uneven leftovers peaked from it’s knotted edges. Inside, there were no lamps nor candles on the walls to indicate where the light came from. At once, a fast wind blew passed and I heard a bang, throwing us into a blinding darkness, the flute no longer heard. I put out my hands in search of something to grab onto.

“Azuka?” I felt a soft surface under my skin. My hands were slapped away.

“That’s my cheek!”

“Sorry.”

“Be quiet,” a voice hissed. “And be still.” The boy was carrying a lamp passed us, and I could just make out I had been at the edge of hole. Any stray movements would have sent me falling. “Follow me,” the boy said already making his way through a narrow corridor.

Halfway down, the boy turned to a corner and I realized what made him seem so familiar. Toby.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reaching out the walls, my fingers curled against a hole. “Toby! Toby!” The boy neither responded nor turned to identify with the call of his name. I let out a yelp when Azuka glazed his shoulders against mine.

“You all right?”

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. The boy moving strongly ahead, the lamp high above his head, he turned sharply like he was trying to avoid something in his path. He turned at the last minute, his eyes like swollen dreams and said. “Try not to fall in. You’ll break your bones if you do.” And continued his walk.

“It’s...Toby,” I murmured airily.

“Look closely and tell me if you still think it’s someone you know.”

I glanced, noticing the silent walks he made. The Toby I knew made noises and crashes. Besides that, there was nothing else I thought was different about him. No! There was something else, hidden but well seen if you look closer at the white wrapper he tied, a sought of scaly flesh peeked out. “Is that...”

“I see an old man with a stick,” he said. “It’s different for everyone.”

“Nwa Mmuo. Spirit child,” Okirikiri said, his voice close to my ears. I jumped because I wasn’t prepared for the voice and the kolanut breath that came after. “Posses powers to cause misfortune but not harmful when under control.”

When he stood at length, I stepped away quickly pressing myself to the roughness of the walls. Okirikiri took the same way the boy went through, his light still illuminating with a dim glow. Azuka was waiting for me to move because he followed me when my feet worked its way and around the mouth like hole spread in form of a yawn.

At first sight of the shrine, I knew it was a holy ground. Monumental columns sprouted out of dry ground resembling tall trees, spreading out like winged animals and met in a handshake. Candles emanating light scents of Frigipani lit in rows, disappearing into a distance where a statue stood on a raffia desk, decorated with baskets of fruits and flowers. The polished statue was glittering in the firelight, as did the welcome mat adorned with palm fronds on each side. At the entrance, a strong smell of incense flickered my nose as more bells rang above me. I was glad the dizziness didn’t come.

As we passed an ash tray set on top of a short column, there was a slight tingle under. There was a large banana leave pushed far along the corner where Azuka pointed I need to let my slippers go. On the flat surface, it reminded me of the thousands of writings I used to make on the smaller ones.

“We’re entering sacred grounds,” Azuka said, taking off his slippers as well.

“You are going to stand before pure powers. The least anyone can do is to show respect,” Okirikiri explained.

Hypocrite.

The sound of the Oja resonated from somewhere. The boy was off standing close to one of the candle light which dances to the rhythm of tone. It was the only one moving to it, the others still like knives. Two girls sparkling in white wrappers, emerged from opposite angles, chalk dots across their chests and around their wrists. They looked young in my eyes, perhaps they were spirit children like the boy. Everything looked creepy; if this were pure, I didn't want to know what the dark was like.

"Take her." Azuka gave my arm a gentle squeeze as the girls swept me away. My stomach clenched. I looked to Azuka for help but his eyes were reading familiar words, 'you wanted this now.' I wanted this, I chose to run after him without having time to think about it. A tense silence descended on us as Okirikiri spoke his next words, "Strip her."

Remember Kamsie, you wanted this.

I flushed and bit my tongue. Thankfully, my shirt was the only piece removed and my front was facing away from Azuka. Several minutes flew by as wet palm were slapped on my back harshly and I was engulfed in a sense so frightening, I whimpered. Okirikiri caught my arm and let his bare other crawl up in soft webs tangling with my hairs. He snapped his head and laid on my chest like he was listening to the erratic beating of my heart. I gritted my teeth. I wanted to resist him, pry myself away from his touches. To stand by and watch myself get assaulted in a room with strangers and a not so stranger- touching the most intimate part, my personal spaces. But he's my father, maker, it should be fine, right?

"Repeat what I say," he said, stepping away to watch me with his piercing gaze.

I nodded slowly. "Ok."

"Reach into me, my soul, my divinity, my everything."

"Reach into me, my soul, my divinity, my everything..."

Something sharp pierced into me, directly at my heart. With a mixture of panic and fear, I clenched my chest, my eyes watery with tears and my breathing labored. It was moving, trying to have its way up. I tried to fight it with many grips, but it was strong for me to stop. Ringing in my head resonated with many tingles, morphing into a bad kind of headache. Instinctively, I closed my eyes. I felt a compelling hand reaching for my soul, and then a sharp snap threw me in a land of greens and browns. The colors came to me quickly, I could make out nothing from the endless spiral. Then it stopped and it was quiet. Until it was not. Collection of images swarm like fast fishes in streams, coming at me in a violent rage.

Muffled voices came with violent screams and cries of babies. The atmosphere was misty with fog. Someone was walking through its thickness, reeling through it with waves of his hands. Okirikiri marveled through a nest of bloodied bodies with lifeless eyes, then knelt over one, a child in her early years. He dug his hands behind her head, and raised her. I thought he was going to walk out of frame, into the mist but he went left and knelt again in front of a heap of sand. It took a few seconds to realize it was grave. Slowly, I was being pushed forward. I saw the name written on the tomb stone, Okirikiri.

Then images flashed again with speed, stopping over where Okirikiri was having a hushed conversation with a man, after which he hands him over a basket, my basket. "I'm counting on

you Dozie,” he said. The man was running in the woods, occasionally checking the paths he left behind. In his hands was my basket, bouncing with his white beards. Then the image flashed to when he gave a woman the basket before leaving without turning. The images danced for the third time. I stood in a sought of moving house, watching two people staring down at the contents in the basket oblivious to a kind of animal making squishy noises as it chewed on a fly.

“He says she is the fate of Ebos,” the woman said.

“And you believed that?”

She nodded with a wishful look. “I do but...”

“You feel somethings not right.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well...” the man said turning to her, his words hanging like loose strings.

The woman sighed and turned away to the candle light shimmering on a high pitch. I blinked. It was her. She looked exactly like the person in my questioning dreams, cotton skin, flourishing lips; I wasn’t mistaken. Similar to a snapshot this time, I found myself in her arms rocking to the rhythm of her hum, my hands reaching out to her necklace. My baby fingers played with it, dragging it down to my ready to bite lips. I was expecting her to flood my ears with her calm voice, but none of it came.

“What are you thinking of master?” the man asked, approaching with a steaming cup. The atmosphere was different, and produced an eerie feel. The the evenly arranged space was disorganized to the point, everything broken could never be replaced. The winged creature was still by the door, almost resembling one of the bronze statues.

It took her a while to answer. “I won’t take my chances tortoise.”

“So?”

“I’ll do it.”

Then I was back in my basket, and there was a current of water beneath me touching my skin. I was crying from the whimsical shivers. Being too small has its own disadvantages sometimes for my hysterical cries should have knocked the basket over if I were older and I would have made a successful escape. The shivers seized and it felt like time stopped for a while. Voices resonated, not one nor two, like ten thousands of voices sang to my tiny ears; they were the words I always remembered but never heard till the end. My baby eyes were closing to the ends of the words; they wanted to stay awake so badly, but it could not overcome the sudden nap. MY MEMORY WAS ALL WRONG.

The sun was setting backwards now against the insides of my closed eyes. It’s tip reached the my eye balls, filling them with harsh warmth, cutting away the blackness like sharp knives. My body came alive with the sudden pain in my lower abdomen. I opened my eyes, drunk with relief, floating in realization I wasn’t physically numb. The tip of a blade was pointing to my throat, rock hard fists stretched to my stomach. Azuka face was pale, so were the immobile girls pasted on the wall. I looked around, disoriented and saw things I hadn’t expected. The shrine was a mess, broken statues and rolling offerings, candles slanted awkwardly pouring burning wax on the mat.

“What happened?” I asked, reaching out to push the object out of my face.

To my surprise, Azuka recoils. “Stay back or I’ll swing.” If I hadn’t been looking for a reason he said those words, I would have missed the trembles of his arms and the quiver of his lips.

“Azuka what...”

“Shut up!” he yelled. There was blind anger and fear swelled in his eyes. He reminded me of myself when I cradled my basket and hated on anyone who told me to give back on my father ever going to see me.

Okirikiri reached out and caught Azuka’s shoulders. “Let her be,” he said. I could see the gleam of hesitancy in his eyes above his thin lips; ever so slowly, he withdrew his sword and fist, still watching me with snake eyes.

“What happened?” I repeated. I took a step away, confused when I glanced at the around again, this time noticing the boy shivering at one end of the room.

“You saw something Kamsie. It triggered the power within you,” said Okirikiri.

“I did this?”

“You did more than this!” Azuka said with gritted teeth.

“That’s enough my prince. One cannot take the evil out of the dark,” Okirikiri said, then commanded with a heavy tone Laced with, confusion?. “Sit.”

Shadow clouded my vision as I reached down to sit. The pain came sharply, so exquisite, I barely noticed the bloodily stain spilling from my stomach. That was true, I had never gotten cut before. It was a surprise when red blood turned purple- the same purple my eyes were in my reflection against the offering dish.

I reached out to feel the intricacy of my eye balls. “My eyes. They’re... they’re purple.”

“It’s just a tip of what you truly are.”

Azuka remained still, watching passively. He hung his head to a side with hooded expressions.

“I was in a basket. All this while, I thought she sang me a peace song when I was cradled in her arm.”

“What you saw was a Mami Wata, intercessors. They have many names depending on what they are to you.”

“She sent me into water...”

“To seal your powers.”

Quickly, I turned towards him. “You mean she...”

“Mami wata’s are powerful transcendent who leave out in the body to have rest. She was my friend, and I trusted her to bring you to safety.”

“You talk in the past.”

“No one has seen her for seventeen years.”

“The same year she took me away.”

He nodded. “As much as I was the one who made you, the block in your powers is something even I cannot dissemble,” he said. “The only way possible is to use the same method she used.”

“The song.”

“It’s the only way.”

I scrambled to my feet defying his previous order, gripping my side to ensure a better rise. “But I don’t know the song. I’ve tried everything I could to find the last word.”

“You will have to try again.”

“It’s not as easy as you say.”

Okirikiri bent low and picked a fallen apple. As if it were a signal of some sought, the two women unglued themselves from the wall, rushing to pick up the other fruits. “It will be if you take it from a different angle.”

“What angle?”

“An angle you haven’t tried.”

One of the girls brought over the dish- now filled. He placed the apple he picked gently into it, taking the dish for himself to place it where it belonged on the table. The girls inclined their head towards me in a greeting, before they filed away mechanically, out the same way they came.

“Could you give me a kind of hint?” I asked.

He looked at me dully and then to Azuka who started staggering away to the entrance and out. “I’ve done my part.”

“But...”

Okirikiri acknowledged me with a short bow, face blank like the first time we met. “You should clean up your wounds with bitter leave,” he said before leaving. “And cover yourself.”

Azuka was leaning on a pillar at the entrance of the hut, hitting his leg on stray pebbles who found their way to his path. Poor pebbles were thrown meters away from his accurate hit on their smooth edges. His eyes still possessed that distance look he had in the shrine, watching impassively the birds chirping on their nests.

“Are you all right?” I asked calmly, touching his shoulders.

He jerked, slapping my hands away to take it in a strong hold. Azuka’s face registered the fearful look on my face and released with a sigh. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“It’s fine. Just don’t do that again.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“Not that,” I said and tapped my bleeding side whose stain marked my shirt. If it weren’t red, my purple blood would have exposed more than I needed it to. “This.”

He gasped. “I did this?”

“You don’t remember.”

Azuka caught his lower lip between his teeth and shook his head; I glanced down at his trembling hands and saw that they were pale. He took them and rubbed his face, it looked painful.

“I’m so sorry Kamsie. I thought...I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“During the war I watched how the people were destroyed. The bloods, the cries, the ripping of their heads with that cold chilling eyes.”

“Like mine.”

He nodded. “It was the same.”

“Exactly?”

“Exactly.”

“You were little. How could you have seen correctly?”

“Nobody forgets the purple eyes once you see it.”

Remembering the surprise which gripped me when I caught sight of my eyes, I touched them curious to know if they were still indigo. At first glance, I could have sworn it was the dents and firelight, which manipulated the reflection of myself.

“They’re normal,” he said, straightening his back. I heaved a sigh of relief and gripped my side – I hissed. “We should get going before I’m declared missing.”

“Kamfeechi knows where we are.”

“Not him,” he said as he turned away and added. “The king is something when I do not tell him of my whereabouts.”

I felt my mouth twitch in a frown. “He knows you went to Tails?”

He folded his arm across his torso without looking at me, and I thought I saw a look of a certain deceit. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “Good fishes are hard to catch in Heads nowadays.”

It took a while for me to release what he was trying to do. My frown went up in a smile. “Yeah,” I told him, going along with his lie. “Good fishes are difficult to find.”

I heard the shuffling of leaves up ahead. I looked from Azuka turning with a questioning gaze, to the bushes, Zina spilling from within. Then she broke into a sigh and headed towards us with a splint.

“The king requests your presence,” she said, as she turned to me with a panic gaze. “And her.”

#

I knew the king’s palace would be a lot bigger than where I stayed, but I still wasn’t prepared for what I saw. It was five times Azuka’s home, and his was massive. Rows of meaty status, columns, pillars, name it- all made of bronze and glittering gold, tiger skin soaring like birds on the ceilings, feathers from peacocks lavished the walls a step difference in how they were placed, alongside lateens too big from a hand to carry. Despite the beautiful interior, there was something it that seemed too much, like it was forced on against their will. Slight cracks reminded me of my room in tails, curvy walls resembled elastic about the give out.

I tried to calm my nerves the best way I could, and the beating of my heart. I went as far as to sing my song to reduce the tension, but it made it worse. Why would the king want to see me? What if he finds out I’m from Tails? As we moved through a gravel path, I touched my face marks to ensure it was there; not that it was going to close up anytime soon. Azuka was matching

forward making hushed conversations with Zina beside him trying to keep up with his long strides, while I shuffled behind thinking of ways I was going to face the king.

A narrow knitted rug ran at length to where a round table sat adorned with empty plates, cutleries and cups surrounding a man- presuming him to be the king, in his later years, pot belied, and a trickle of face hair formed a circle around his chin to his mustache area. He wore a red crown decorated with cowries, Isiagu top unable to hide his physical flaw and a trouser of the same kind. Around his beefy neck, a single coral bead dropped to the fan he tapped on himself. Behind him stood one of the maidens caressing his neck, her wrappers loosely tied, hair strings stuck out in random places. Noticing our advancement, she bent to whisper in his ear.

Azuka stuck out a hand sideways, preventing me to advance any further. "I'll go speak to him first," he said without looking at me. "You stay too Zina."

A resounding clap resonated. The king clapped the loudest even if it were only once, stinging to the ear drum. "Come, come. Come sit with me." He waved his hands signaling for us to come forward. "Go, go," he said, and dusted the maiden's hands away almost immediately. She in turn bowed in greeting and inclined her head towards Azuka, then she went off, holding tightly her upper wrapper to her chest.

We walked slowly towards him. As we drew closer, the king sat up straighter, his curious eyes catching mine. Then his lips stretched out in a slow smile. Closer, I noticed Azuka was a spitting image of him- only younger and garnished with no wrinkles. "Sit, sit," he commanded. And we sat; Azuka beside him and me opposite; Zina stood away, reminding me the king disapproved of dark gene's.

"Azuka," the king said. "You haven't properly introduced your new guest to me. Who is she?" He gestured to me, smiling toothily.

"As you can see," he began gradually. "She already belong to the gods."

For a moment, I was convinced he wasn't going to buy it when he said nothing when seconds passed. "So I can't have her?"

"I don't think you can father."

"Why?"

"You..."

The king caught him off with the scrap of his chair as he got up. I saw the silent panic looks on Azuka's face. The king rounded the table occasionally whipping his fan against himself, the bead on his neck dangling and he placed his hands, leaning towards me. I almost peeped myself. He met my cheeks with his wet lips, exactly where my marks laid. I felt the urge to wipe it off, but I knew he wouldn't have liked that very much. "What's your name, daughter of the gods?"

I glanced nervously at Azuka, who nodded encouragement.

"I...Kamsie," I stuttered.

"Kamsie!" he exclaimed. "What a beautiful name, dear, dear." His raised his delicate fingers gently rubbing the area under my chin. I thought of what Azuka said about his father and he was right, the king was really something, a lustrous something. My skin crawled but I was soon released and was yelling. "Let's eat, let's eat." Then he strolled back to his seat.



A lively buzz of feet crowded the room. At every corner, maidens and male servants spilled in with calabashes over filled with food, clustering us as many scents floated around. Instantly, my stomach gave an angry rumble. They distributed evenly on the plates in front of us, poured light colored juices in cups and executed a small bow when they were done. They didn't leave, instead they rested on walls at the ends of the room waiting for us to finish. Only one passed around a bowl filled with washing water.

"So, so," the king said, digging his hands into the bowl, to wash. "How far did you go?"

"Breast," said Azuka. "I found more fishes which can last you-us a lifetime." It took everything in me not to snort at this. Azuka was a good liar, I had to give it to him. "It can feed the others outside if we get enough."

"Fishes can never be enough."

"The people suffer father."

"They cause their own problems," the king said. "I give them lands, water..."

"All dead and dry."

The king took a hearty bite off the food in his hands, chewed, swallowed and said. "They could have disposed the bodies somewhere else."

"Where!" exclaimed Azuka sounding irritated. "What goes out never comes in."

"What stays in, stays in. They have brains, let them think." The king took a sip from his cup and continued digging Akpu into his soup.

I washed my hands when I was given the bowl, coloring the water purple. I glanced nervously at the maiden whose eyes widened a fraction. "Ink," I whispered.

"I think you need to go out and see for yourself what the villages looks like," Azuka said. "The least you can do is to give them good food, especially anytime you give them tasks."

"You can do whatever you what when you're king. This is my reign, my reign," the king murmured softly.

"It's our reign father."

"Dear, dear girl," said the king, his previous conversation dying with Azuka's sigh. "Who are you attached to?"

"I don't..."

"Okirikiri." I sent Azuka a look of gratitude.

"A villager or a daughter of a chief?"

I nodded. "Villager."

"You are lucky to be in the palace," the king said, and I heard a snort from Zina. "I'm sure you family will be on their heads in gratitude you were chooses by the gods, even if it's not a position worth talking about. You only work with what they say, no freedom, no nothing." I didn't bother to correct him even when I didn't know what I was anymore.

"Like our people," Azuka said.

The king ignored his comment and said. "The shrine will not be a good place for your type."

"My type?"

"How old are you?"

“Sixteen.”

The king buzzed in surprise, and Azuka even looked curious. “Young and full of life!” He said, his brown eyes sliding over to one of the maidens standing. “Unlike the aged one we have nowadays.” The maidens were no younger than twenty, tall, trickles of years serving settled in eye bags. I felt embarrassed for them, it wasn’t their fault age didn’t have friends. With a slick wave, one hurried over. “Prepare a room.”

“No...”

“No objections. I want you in my palace instead of that shrine.” I was torn between telling him the prince housed me already, but before I could reach my final decision, the maidens clustered me, steering me away from the table. And I hadn’t touched my food yet.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I had two problems; the window and my wound.

I was supposed to be asleep, enjoying the comfortable bed with an overhead nest, but for the last hour I've been shivering from blasting cold, while trying to understand why the cuts on my body were no longer open and the pains dead like solid game. If there was anything I didn't need were a jumble of questions that required answers.

The room the king had given me was no different from the prince's- just a nest to keep out mosquitos and a window open to dancing trees which whips unwanted air inside. I wished I could close the shutter, unfortunately the window was specially made in a way to kill whatever was in. I stretched out with a yawn, cracking my fingers in the air; my mouth open to flies and passing mosquitos. After moments of more cracks from my back, I reached out run my hands against the black beaded eyes of the dead bear glued to the wall. Beside it was a drilled in hole, with a burning lamp illuminating the room and the empty plate I used prior. Zina had come over with my untouched food and I was grateful despite the stiffness in her tone when I said, "Thank you." I don't think it would be so bad to return the plates myself, as long as I didn't bump into the king, my skin was not ready to crawl after our last encounter. And besides, I was bored.

As I picked up the plate, a soft knock came at the door. I slipped my feet into my slippers, blew the fire, throwing me into mid-darkness. I went to the door and opened it. The maiden who had barged into my room with Zina was standing on the other side, a pile of neatly folded blue clothes on her hands, on top were a bottle of ink and paper leaves. She bowed holding out her hands. I took them, in turn she collected the plates with fingers elegant with blemishes and burns. Being distracted, I barely registered the words she said after and before I could ask for a repeat, she was already walking down the hallway.

If I had known, I would not have blown the lights off. I closed my door with my back and placed the pile on my bed carefully so the ink doesn't spill. My feet carried me back to the lantern hole, picking up a match tucked in amongst others, I struck it on the rough edges of the wall. I lit the lantern. A silent breeze blew passed and when I turned, two white dots flashed outside the window. For a while I stared, then I blinked unsure of what I'd seen and when I opened them, an owl flew away.

I went back to the bed. I looked at the contributing garments which saved me from being found out, even by the king. There were a few thing I could say about the king of the Heads, and they were not qualities a ruler should have. Despite his treacherous like for women, he was gullible, greedy, and had a bad taste in what sizes of clothes he wore. I certainly knew Azuka was I'd rather spend time with Azuka than with his father anytime of the day- being locked with him poses as a better option than to let the king's saliva water my cheeks.

The only other thing I loved about the room, was that I did not have to go outside the room to take a bath. A small bathroom was caved in by the corner- an easy slip in and out, no tiptoes or quick walks. I threw the bloody clothes at one end, washed myself and loosened my braids. The tight coils tangled in my fingers as I plaited them in twos for a different look. I didn't think I was going to be attacked with strange hands this time, but I wouldn't take any chances.

I separated the writing materials from the clothes; carefully, I placed them on the bedside table. The clothes were soft to touch, evenly distributed calabashes dangled when I dusted them from barely noticeable creases. It was a dress this time, and it fitted perfectly like a second skin. At first the fabric resembled plain one worn by the maidens, but when taken a closer look at, there were crested squares running through and the feather I'd seen resting on Azuka's tent relaxed inside.

The sun had finally risen the time I was done dressing myself. I took a deep breath knowing what I had to take care of next. The song. The truth was that, I was scared. What if the song refused to come to me in time? What if the orange moon whizzed by and I'd not be able to save Hanye? I should think of her while I write, the desperation within me might help.

But it didn't.

Two hours, fifty-five minutes and three seconds, I repeated the same mistakes I always made; irrelevant words and thrown paper leaves across the room. There was a point where I just stared at the blank leaves, and another where I tried to drill into my subconscious with shut eyes but they all amounted to the same words I knew- nothing more. I ran my hands on my face in frustration, if only there were some kinds of books I could look at. Hanye should have pressured me more, I could have swallowed my pride and asked the warden. My brains were beginning to cave in from thinking too much. Taking a deep breath, I slipped the cover of the ink on, clenching it tightly until I heard a soft click.

Intending to go for a stroll to let the winds bring memories, I went to the door and opened it. Zina stood outside, her fist raised to a knock.

"The king likes you," she said visually eating me from neck to knee, where the dress stopped. "Even got the size right."

"It's not from you?"

"Of course not," she said already walking away. "I would have given you something better."

Knowing the king had a hand in the creation of the dress, I felt uncomfortable crawls all over my body once again. With a jitter, I followed Zina through the hallway, then another by the right, descended a short stairs exposing us to a roofless space. We ascended another short, approaching the door which led to the king's dining. Zina must have noticed the hesitancy in

my step because she said, “The king prefers having a different kind of breakfast.” She pushed the heavy doors open and added. “In his room.”

The room had random bussing of conversations from tons of maidens and male servants; some sitting on the chairs while those who were not able to squeeze in took the floors. A group at the corner were throwing pieces from their plates at each other with secret smiles when one of the male servants whisked by. Some talked loudly, and some tucked their head in as they concentrated on their breakfast. I wouldn’t be surprised if it were their first meal of the week. Despite the lack of space to eat properly, the king’s chair was left empty. A sign of respect, I think. A hush fell in the room, everyone raising their head to look at the approaching us and like a wind whizzed by, they went back to eat their food. But it was not the same, their movements were tensed and some peeked with side eyes. Not at me but at Zina. I’d forgotten Zina was not one of them, she was half-darkness, something many would hate of a person. Silently, I wondered how they’ll react if word got out of my true nature, what I truly am. What about Hanye, would she be frightened, hate, hurt her best friend for being one of thing that killed her parents and destroyed her life? I didn’t want to think about that, not now at least, saving her was top priority.

Two maiden hurriedly wrenched their butts from their seats, leaving their untouched plates for us to meet. Zina swooped in on one with a scowl and me on the other.

“I really think you should smile more Zina,” a maiden said from the opposite side. “You will have more friends that way. Not that I’m saying you’re not my friend, I’m your friend. We all know that.”

“Yeah!” the one beside her exclaimed. “We both know you’re not the monster they think you are.”

“Thanks,” Zina said drily not seeming thankful at all. “Kamsie, these are my two idiotic friends, Akwaeke and Chi.”

“Akwaeke from the city of Eye,” she said. “My father is a carpenter and my mother picks the dead fishes in the sea for us to feed. That was then though. They are better off now that I’m in the palace. I take good fishes to them.” She exchanged her plate with the one in front of me. “It’s better than eating leftovers.”

I frowned and opened my mouth to protest but the other one cut me off with her introduction. “Chi,” she said. “I’m from the nose. My father died during practice and my mother is sick.”

“Sorry,” I said.

She waved it off with a laugh. “They’re better off dead anyway.”

I raised my eyebrows. These two had a taste of pains too even though they lived in a place where they could get what they want.

“So when are you going to tell the prince you love him,” Akwaeke said making an exchange with Chi’s plate and Zina’s.

“Stop!” Chi protested. “I wasn’t done with that.”

Zina flushed. “Shut up,” she said, and stuffed her mouth with a full hand without washing.

“I think you should do it before someone takes him away,” said Akwaeke. “Like me or one of the beautiful court ladies or one of the chief daughters.”

“Yeah!” Chi agreed. “You’re at risk, now that his birthday is in three days.”

“Two,” Zina corrected with a full mouth and swallowed. “I told you...”

“You’re not suitable,” Akwaeke said a little stiff. “None of us are suitable. Yet the king lets us warm his bed.”

“Except me. I peed on the first day,” Chi protested. Then beamed and took a bite from the plate. “So cold!” She spat out straight for the plate.

“What happens on his birthday?” I asked.

“Successor and marriage plans,” Zina answered stiffly. “And no I will not tell the prince I love him.” She told the girls with an end of conversation tone.

Akwaeke raised her hands in mock surrender. “If you say so.”

“Scared Zina.” Chi stuck out her tongue to which Zina threw a piece of off at her. And they burst into a hearty laughter reminding me so much of the children at the orphanage. Hanye and I would pick fights at dinner to cheer the children up after a long day. Although, it always ended us up in the warden’s office, I didn’t regret the full blown smiles on their faces.

Did I have to tell her, the prince knew she like him with her obvious actions? I certainly

There was a total seize in conversations and munching and when I looked towards the entrance, the Azuka was striding in along with Chibuzor by his side. He approached the other end of the long table and sat on the Kings chair. A maiden appeared from nowhere, dropping a plate in front of him. “Go on,” he ordered. We were thrown once again to the ear-splitting buzz.

“I still don’t understand why you like the prince,” Akwaeke said with an irritated glance at Azuka who was looking at something a male servant showed him. The boy looked about thirteen, slender and light skinned. He laughed with delight as the prince patted his hair down and rubbed it.

“He’s kind,” Zina answered.

“That’s all?” Akwaeke said.

Zina sighed in frustration. “He saves people Akwaeke. The prince is the kind of person Ebos need to become whole again.”

“I see a fraud,” said Akwaeke in a hushed voice. Then she placed a hand on the side of her mouth. “Rumor has it that he want to look good incase Kosie comes back.”

“Lies,” Zina said with gritted teeth.

“It’s true. I heard it from the guards who work inner chambers,” Chi piped in and took another bite from the plate. She gagged and spat it out. “Why do I keep doing that?”

“Because you’re stupid.” Akwaeke looked appalled.

“And how did you get to the inner chambers Chi?” Zina asked.

She shrugged. “The same way a rat gets into a door.”

I looked across the room to the prince. He was making light conversations with Chibuzor who was sitting beside him. In him I saw a hard working prince who cared for his nation more than the king himself and besides, rumors were just rumors; a circulating story with no concrete evidence. I must have stared for too long because the prince looked up and raised an eyebrow. I turned away. Chi got up with her plate and walked away, mumbling about how she was going to wash her mouth a hundred times.

“Who is Kosie?” I asked, ignoring the fact I’d been caught staring.

Akwaeke exchanged a tensed glance with Zina and I knew I was touching personal grounds. I reminded myself I was an outsider, a daughter of the gods, I quoted in my head. Certain things in the palace were not meant to slip to another as long as they didn’t belong to the palace.

“So tell me about you.” It was how the conversation was diverted to me. I gave her a brief introductions about myself and lied about the rest like where I was from, who my parents were, making sure they corresponded with what Azuka told the king.

The next hours passed in a blur with eating’s and drinking’s. Chi returned with a new plate, munched it down greedily and I laughed with Akwaeke slapped her back when she choked. Zina laughed too easing up the final tension.

“I won’t bury you when you die,” Akwaeke joked still slapping Chi’s back.

“I know,” Chi said entangling herself from her hold. “It’s sad we do not get buried when we die?”

The three seemed disappointed by her last sentence, especially Zina.

“At least you get someone who will cry over you,” protested Zina pushing away her empty plates to slump on her chair.

“The king doesn’t allow you get buried,” I said it not as a question but as a confirmation of what I heard. “Let me guess. They are thrown away.”

Chi looked over her shoulders and said. “The city...”

“The city of ear has a large river which cuts across all cities. They’re going to put us with the humans they catch from tails. Disgusting,” said a boy cutting her off. He slumped on an empty chair I hadn’t realized was vacant until now. “Once you serve the palace, you become their property till you die with a special reward. Take care of your family in the cities forever. It’s in the contract,” he continued.

“No one called you Okere,” Chi sneered.

“Humans are not so bad,” I said, feeling the sudden urge to defend my kind.

“They are. Trust me.” He looked horrified. “They are the reason Ebos is in this mess in the first place. Greedy idiots don’t know when to stop.” I wanted to mention their king was the same and they had a hand in the division too but I held lips in-between my teeth.

“It’s no reason to kill the other. No sides do.”

I was extremely grateful when Zina spoke next. “We’re late,” she said, her chair scraping the grounds when she rose.

We offered our goodbyes and see soon with a murmured “Thanks for the meal” from me, we walked away. There were fewer people in the room now, removing their used plates and placing them in a stack which was already too high; it could fall at any point.

“Can you please take me to the Library?” I asked after a while.

She pressed her hands slowly on the door. “There are no libraries in the palace. Only studies reserved for the royal families.”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t know what to do if...”

“We can always use the rat way in,” Zina offered with a shrug. “We have to ask Chi.”

#

It didn’t take much convincing to get Chi to tag along. Chi took us to a largely circular building deep within the main palace where the grounds seemed desolate and abandoned. The path was narrow, the wall seemed like it were closing in on us as we went forward, letting the lamps lead. I could hear hisses on the other side of the walls and some, I could see swirled in



zigzags, in and out. Despite the thought of the walls closing in on us as it became narrower, there was something foreboding about the snakes uniting movements that it almost seemed like they had a purpose. So, this was the rat way in, I would have prepared if it were called the snake way.

We came across a dead end, then made our way to a turn, Chi touching the walls navigating with her eyes closed, which seemed to be the way for her powers to manifest better. She seemed to be the type who could map out hidden areas, especially within the palace because according to her, ‘she’d been here a long time.’ I lagged behind as we made another turn through another endless corridor, the hisses getting louder and the place reeked of a rotten smell. I sniffed.

“Be quick,” Zina said in an irritable voice, reducing her pace for me to catch up. “I don’t want to get an earful from the tailors.”

I restrained a snort. “You don’t have be here.”

Zina stretched to look at Chi to make sure she was not close enough to hear what she was about to say and whispered. “Everything has been overwhelming for you since the beginning. I know but you’ve been on edge since we left. What’s wrong?”

“Chibuzor told me you hated me. So, why?”

She shrugged. “The prince. Now tell me,” she pressed.

“It’s not common to hear you were made out of what took your best friend and destroyed your village. And now I’m going to look for a book to help me get that friend back through a snake infested passage way in a kingdom that hates people like me.” It took everything in me not to bit my lips.

She dusted my shoulders. “It’s not that bad when you say it out loud.”

I smiled and shook my head. “It is when it happens to you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Sometimes I honestly hate you and your answers.”

“I think we can agree on something for once in our lives.”

“We’re almost there,” Chi called out, standing beside a thatch door. “Just behind this door.” When she pried open the door, the snakes crawling redirected their movement confusingly, heading toward the door. There were hisses coming from under now, and I could feel the activities under me, and so did Zina, because she wore a look of confusion. I squinted hard when I noticed something falling from the top of the door but I could not tell if it were the snakes. “Don’t move!”

I felt Zina’s fingers brush on mine. “Snakes are prince Azuka’s favorite,” she murmured.

I looked sideways at her, not moving my head. “Why?”

“Honestly,” she said. “I don’t know. I met him loving the slimy things.”

“So, these are he’s?”

“Maybe. I’ve never gotten close enough to know he keeps some of them in walls.”

I gulped. “Some?”

“Run!” Chi was already running through the door and we followed almost immediately. I wondered why she had told us to stop initially. My heart in my throat, I jumped over one nearly missing his venomous bite. With a bang, Chi shut the door.

“Next time I’ll ask Azuka for help,” I said breathing erratically from the run.

“You could but then the king will know he let a stranger in.” Zina was pointing at something I couldn’t see; it was hidden behind the flight of stairs leading downwards. I went to join her and so did Chi. Getting closer, I saw what she was pointing at; a beefy guard in black manned the main entrance, holding tightly a battle axe. The axes looked oily for easy slices and the handle roughly ties with wires and strings. There was a kind of hollow expression on his face, and I knew he was the type who would never blink when he had to put down an enemy.

“Raised to kill,” Zina said.

“He looks like a guard. Just a slight difference.” I frowned at him when he moved.

“He is, but the king specially pumped a part of him into it to keep the past records from outside hands,” she explained.

“Who would want past records?” I asked.

“I heard the past kings did the same,” Chi added. “That would mean he’d be stronger with each power pump.” Chi climbed the staircase and was moving silently with her arms spread out, and she crouched matching the height of the railing.

I was looking at her strangely. “What are you doing?”

She turned back and I noticed a finger was placed across her lip. “Hurry up,” she whispered and continued her descend.

“We have to do everything we can not to get caught,” said Zina imitating Chi with eagle arms. “I’m too young to get my head cut off.”

“Me too,” Chi said in hushed voices.

“I thought you will do anything for the Prince.”

I followed them down the staircase, ducking lower when we got to where the guards could easily spot us. There was a pair of steel railing ushering us to a set of doors in an erotic kiss, in-between it was a steel handle tied to it were long ropes attached to the side and when Chi and Zina took opposite sides and undid it, I was enchanted.

The place was screaming with vines, covering the story high building and the ceilings were curved in an arch made from exquisite kinds of wood. A hole was drilled into the center, where a long statue of a man bearing three arms pointed to different paths; left, middle and right. It was easy to tell the figure was of a past king from its carefully decorated crown; the maker had taken their time to mold every type of beads the king possessed in his crown.

“There are three pathways- the left takes you to the king’s chambers, the one at the middle takes you to the Princes chamber.” Chi pointed out and eyed Zina, then added. “The right takes you to the library. This is as far as I go.”

“Thank you,” I said and waited for her to excuse us but she didn’t.

Zina looked at her. “You should get going now.”

Chi relaxed her hands on Zina’s shoulders, staring straight at her with a bird eyes of worry. “Tell me how it goes alright? Akwaeke and I will be there whatever happens.” She patted her down and left. None of us spilled the real reason we wanted to go through the rat way, Chi thinks Zina wanted to find a way into the princes chambers she could surprise him with her ‘love,’ and I was going to set the ‘mood’, I didn’t even know what that meant.

Zina swore in a language I didn’t know. It sounded like swords piercing into the soul. “C’mon,” Zina said, leading me through the middle, the large hand ornamenting with deep shadows. “The library is where we usually hold our meetings. I always came in through normally because the prince took us in.” Then laughed. “Now I’m sneaking in.”

“It’s for a good cause,” I consoled. “I don’t think we are going to get caught.”

“Getting caught is the least of my problems.”

My step slowed. Faintly, I guessed what was troubling Zina. “It’s about Azuka, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I don’t keep secrets from him. I made that promise.”

“It’s troubling you.

She nodded in honesty. “I know if he knew you needed the records, he could have taken you in. A risk he will be willing to take.”

“But you don’t want that for him.”

“Not if it will cost him his last resort. The guard can sniff out those who are not Transcendent, and slash their throat without a second thought.”

Instinctively, I placed my hand on my neck. “You don’t think he will know if I’m in?”

“Let’s hope so.”

A chill rippled through me. So, there were chances I might be headless before I found Hanye? And with an axe made of the same steel that rained on us that night. I quickened my steps to catch up to Zina. I didn’t want my crazy thoughts getting the best of me.

At the end of the shadow, we stopped at an open hole large enough to fit any size. The end of hole was rough like it was drilled in a hurry and spider webs decorating it resembled light lids.

“What exactly is this place?” I looked around and more cobwebs designed the blocks.

“Safe house from the war.”

Zina swept the webs aside with her hands and crawled in before me. The hole was already covering up from lack of maintenance and use; apparently, the war was no more so there would be no use for it. I saw the spider who must have made the hole its home; small and the color of winter chestnut, crawling above on its branch like legs, then she sat upon a web of silver strand. Zina swept again and we emerged at our destination. I gasped.

Row and rows of bamboo shelves lined the room from bottom to top. The one shelf which was curved in a way the books could spill was held up by a leafless tree on its sides. I’d only seen and used green paper leaves, the ones in the shelves were chestnut brown, sun yellow and anthocyanin. The reading chairs were carved with fine wood, not from the bamboos we had at the orphanage which were of lower resources, even compared to the ones at the palace.

At the side of the room, behind another finely made desk covered with transparent linen, an older woman gaped openly, eyes resembling calabashes. From the wrinkles on her face, sagging chin I’d say she was a little over seventy. When Zina came forward, her demeanor visibly relaxed and she sat back down with bored expressions, dipping her reed pen into wet ink.

“Morning Mrs. Seotu,” said Zina.

The woman didn’t look up and wrote on the pile of leaves. “I didn’t see anything.”

Zina sighed looking relieved. “Thank you.”

The woman grunted in reply. Zina took my arm and led me between the shelves until I could see the woman anymore- an earthly smell attacking my nostrils. “Seotu is the record keeper. She knows I’m with the prince. Sometimes, she’s a good conservationist. ”

“I can see that.”

Zina picked up one of the books above, the edges chips out, slowly landing at the bottom. “You need to be careful. It screams of age.”

The shelves loomed over us like a tall monster. I inclined my head upwards, taking in the hefty numbers I had to go through and they were a lot. “You are going to help me.”

She placed the book back in. “Goodluck.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My efforts were futile. I was not going to finish flipping the books till the next year, that's if I refused my eyes from closing each night. When I placed one back into its slot, I took another close by, running my eyes over it before whisking off to take a seat. The ones I came across had nothing related to what I looked for; farming records, a king's loving fantasies which blinded me with their poorly drawn illustrations and over the top descriptions of scenes I never should have read. I cringed at some point and slammed the book too hard in, chips from leaves fell leaving its covers bare; three of them actually. Somehow, the record keeper knew what I'd done, she chided and cajoled me with her grunt that I had enough for the day. And truly I had, I couldn't remember the last time I had a bath; it's been days.

"Goodbye Mrs. Seotu. See you tomorrow," I called out and she growled in return. "And sorry about the books."

"I sincerely wish you will not come back," she addressed me for the first time then grumbled in words I couldn't hear as she picked the broken covers piece by piece, placing them carefully in her hands.

The sun was sizzling skins by the time I got out. I spent the rest of the afternoon in my room washing off the dirt I acquired, brushing my hair and luckily, there was a pile of new sets of clothing waiting for me. Eventually, I fell asleep when my body kissed the soft surface of my bed, a large contrast from the hard floors of the record room.

When I woke up, the sun was rising from my window. In a few seconds, sounds of metal clashing resonated with the rise. I looked up, but my eyes were still clouded with sleep. I laid back down for a while to get myself mentally prepared for the day. At breakfast, Zina and the prince were nowhere to be found and neither was Chibuzor no matter how hard I searched the room swimming with servants. Luckily for me, the king was absent, his chair standing empty like the first day.

It ended quickly for me, mainly because I didn't make side conversations with anyone. And when I noticed Akwaeke and Chi waving at me as they weaved through the crowd, I pretended I hadn't see them and went the other way, slipping out through the door. I knew the sought of conversations we might have, and it would go along the line of where I was the past days. It was something I wasn't interested in spilling.

I walked through the palace and I picked up snippets from the discussions from servants who had not gone for breakfast or they had finished before I did. They were talking about Azuka's coming birthday excitedly. He would be announced as the crown prince and allowed to pick a wife from the fairest and wealthiest. When I coughed wind of the name, 'Kosi' I strained my ear closer but when they realized I was listening in, they turned and spoke in hush tones.

Palace gossip shouldn't be my second meal of the day. While everyone had their own problems, I had mine to sought out. I needed to figure out to quickest way to go through the books; ask for help, read faster, refuse shut eyes. Apparently, these were solutions at the end of a long rope.

I tried my best to pay attention to where I went. When I held a yelp and pressed down on a something hard, I looked up. Akwaeke was bent over Chi's foot, rubbing it softly with her palms. Akwaeke's face was squeezed painfully, and so did Chi's.

"I think you should watch where you're going."

"You turned her foot to bread."

"Very funny," Chi looked at Akwaeke sourly.

"It's true. You know when something is high up and you press it down, it looks like bread."

Unable to keep it in, I snickered. Immediately, they looked up stunned like they had forgotten I was there. Chi seemed embarrassed but said nothing.

"So..." Akwaeke started and stood up pulling Chi up.

"So what?"

She inclined her head to the door leading outside. "We wanted to give you a tour of the grounds. You know, since you are new. We could take you wherever you want to go."

Chi grinned and wrenched my hands from my side. "Since Zina's out to town, we can take her place for the mean time." Out of town? No wonder I never saw her since she left me in the record room. "The prince sent her on a special assignment."

"What assignment?" I asked in curiosity.

"We don't know. She only told us to let you know she'll be out to town."

"And give you this." Akwaeke plucked a nearly folded notice tucked into her skirt and passed it on to me. I look at it. There was an Intel on Fanan's whereabouts in one of the cities and the prince wanted her to check it out.

"Did you open it?"

"Open it and I'll try not to kill you at night," Chi imitated Zina's voice so well, I could have thought she were the one speaking if I weren't looking.

"So, where do you want to go?" asked Akwaeke.

"Can you take me to the prince?" I told them.

“The prince,” Chi said with giggle.

“What?” I asked, baffled.

Akwaeke shook her head. “And I thought Zina was the only one.”

“Only one in what?”

“In loving the prince of course,” Chi finished.

“It’s not like that,” I defend walking past them to the entrance. “I just have things to tell him.”

“Ah,” Chi cooed.

“Things.” Akwaeke nodded and I knew they hadn’t believed me.

#

My ears bled from their talk about the Prince’s birthday and Akwaeke’s complains about the workload they would get from the elaborate preparations. Chi was excited like the other servants because she would have to dress in her finest clothing’s because the kings loved a good presentation- nothing should embarrass him no matter what in front of his future in laws. At a point, I asked if the servants feel bad about the king using them and they answered with shakes of their heads.

“As longs as our families are well, we don’t care,” Akwaeke answered, and both of them smiled sadly. Honestly, I hoped they were right.

The prince was in the fields practicing with Chibuzor. As we closed in on the wooden fence, I heard the clashes of metal, the same ones I heard outside my window. The field was huge and almost totally empty of grasses. High windmill rotated to a side, its blades gliding smoothing along the parent keeping it still. A tree torn off- perhaps by the wind and laid across wheels from carriages scattered into many pieces. Water poured from a broken tap and lead to where someone spat, the waves of the flowing water carried it to the final stop- few seconds from where we stood.

Azuka’s blade was blue as ice and I was reminded of the time he took on the bush baby. Chibuzor’s sword was the same, well almost the same for his own seemed weaker and bore the color of the sky. They were crouched on opposite side, ready to attack. They moved too fast, the colors of their blades being the only thing I could make out and the growing clinking of swords.

After a while, I became used to their movements. Azuka whirled around, striking, the other blocked it straightaway. He caught Chibuzor’s arm and threw him down, prepared his leg to knock him in but the other rolled away before he could. Chibuzor slid under his legs and a blow came knocking him away. I saw the girl place their hands on their mouth. It seemed the servants were programmed to react when it came to the prince.



Chibuzor laughed. And it seemed to have enrage Azuka; his sword getting darker, he lurched at him with his sword raised high. Chibuzor brought his own to a circular sweep and they met up and down, Azuka hitting with enough force to real Chibuzor backwards. Then Azuka jumped over Chibuzor's arching sweep and elbowed him on his chest, taking a swift turn, he ended the battle with the tip of his blades close of his opponents neck. If he were to mover a step, the blade would break his skin.

Chi erupted in a loud clap and Akwaeke couldn't help but look impressed with the slick way the prince had won his fight. There have been too many ways proving Azuka could successfully serve the kingdom without any complaints from his people. Their attention were on us now, tired eyes looked from me to the maidens who started bowing.

"Bow," Chi hissed, and took my hands to pull me down.

"You may leave," I heard the prince say. "Kamsie stay."

The maidens left in a hurry. When I straightened my back, Chibuzor laid sprawled underneath the broken tap, his arms bent in an unnatural way, drenching himself whole. Striding towards me, the prince whipped his sword as if he were getting rid of impurities and touched it at length. Now a breath away, he bent, seizing his sword jacket and placed his sword in it. He sat, reeking of morning sweat, closed his eyes, his breathing heavily labored. For a moment he was so still. I crossed the fence- it wasn't high too catch my skirt.

He opened his eyes. "How did I do?"

"Could have done better," I said grimly, sitting beside him.

"And here I thought I was about to receive a compliment" He smiled, turning towards me. Mistakenly, I touched his shoulder, felt his shirt sticky with sweat or water- I couldn't tell. It was too wet.

"What?" he said. "Is there something on my face?"

"No. But you are wet."

He adjusted. Then made a little noise, a pained exhale of breath. "And must have twisted too hard."

"May I?" I pointed to his injured side.

He hesitated, nodded. "Okay."

Crawling in front of him, I carefully slipped my hand under his arm and pulled. He grunted with pain as his shoulder made a minuscule crack. I let go, and he rotated his arms, giving me a surprised look. I went back to sit beside him. "How is it?"

"I never took you for a healer" he said.

"I'm not," I replied. "There was this time Hanye dislocated her arms after one of our steals failed. It was inevitable."

"Tails didn't have any healers?"

"In Tails, you are practically on your own."

He unhitched himself from the pillar with a solemn look. "So, tell me. I don't recall sword training to be to your liking."

I took out the letter and handed it over. "Why didn't you tell me you found a link to Fanan?"

He collected the letter out of my hands and stared at it with persnickety dislike. "There should be a law for hand runners," he said. He flung it, landing close to Chibuzor who opened his eyes, turning with confusion. "Zina always loved doing things her own way."

"You can't blame her."

"I do."

"You shouldn't..."

He frowned slightly. "She disobeyed orders." I drew a sharp breath. What if he found out she had kept something else from him. "Penning leaves track to unwanted enemies. Don't forget we are doing this in the shadows."

I stared at him. "What are you going to do?"

He cocked his head to one side then shrugged nonchalantly. "Nothing."

I was so relieved that a little laugh escaped me. "Nothing? I thought you were going to banish her or something."

"It's her first time and I'm not my father."

"You will be a good king, Azuka."

He studied me for a long time and I wished I was hidden under his scrutiny. Azuka's lips drew into a silent smile brightening his face. "Thanks." Then he strengthened his hands, hauling himself up. "Walk with me." Before I could stand, he grabbed my arm and raised me. My heart pounded hard against my rib case for what? I didn't know. I thought it might be from the force he used, or the surprise, I hadn't prepared for it. Azuka pointed at the lone wheel some distance away. "I like to cool off with after walks."

"Ok," I nodded. Together we started off on the stroll.

After a moment of comfortable silence, Azuka broke it with a question. "How far have you gone with the song?"

I bit my lip nervously, not wanting to give away more information than I intended. “I think I need a little bit more time.”

“How long?”

“Two, five.”

“Hours or weeks?” he asked.

“Months.” Taking a mental tour of the mountain like shelves in the record room, hopefully it would not take me longer. “There’s a lot of work to be done.”

“There’s not enough time. Its only two weeks till the red moon and the end of the treaty.”

“I know.” I let out a deep breath.

He sneaked a glance sideways and looked down to where he had slashed. A look of pain settled in his eyes. “Does it still hurt?”

“No.”

Azuka stopped abruptly. “Let me see.”

Azuka’s body language seemed to beg for confirmation and a peaceful mind upon regret. He was not taking what he had done well; he would appreciate the filling of his eyes with the sight of the slash but I wasn’t going to give him the privilege of seeing my skin once again. I shifted uncomfortably begging for privacy.

He gripped my wrist not tightly and searched for confirmation in my eyes. I snatched away from his hold. “The pain is gone and so are the injuries.” Questioning gaze followed.

“Just like that?”

I nodded, walking ahead. “I’m magic, remember?” Soon he joined with a soft laugh, his hands placed behind him, so tightly that I thought he was preventing them from going astray. “This Intel. How did he find Fanan?”

“I sent Kamfeechi to the towns to see what he could find.” He paused for a while and when I thought he wasn’t going to add, he continued. “Someone gave him a letter. Brought it back to me. Whoever wrote it knew we were looking for him.” That must have been why I hadn’t seen Kamfeechi for a while, he was sent on an assignment.

“And you trusted it?”

“Zina is more than capable to take care of herself if danger lurks,” said Azuka. “There is a reason I made her part of the...”

“Biafra’s, I know.”

“What do plan on doing when all this is over,” I asked curiously.

“Prepare to be king.”

“Isn’t that what you have been doing?”

“Probably?” he said and kicked a pebble out of the way. “It’s more like the first phase actually.”

Who is Kosi? I wanted to ask as it stayed at the tip of my lips. Why did people like Akwaeke believe you were a fraud? The second question stood behind, with the third, why do you love snakes? All wanting to spill at once. Luckily, sudden dark clouds invited honeyed rain conjuring sweet patterns on the ground, the thousands of liquid resonated sounds as it dropped, the windmill beating the ones that fell on it. Something skipped by in the distance resembling a rabbit, disappearing behind the shack of the bronze casted I’d seen on the first day.

Azuka spread his hands out, the droplets forming a miniature pool in his palms. “Soon, everything will matter.”

**THEY OVER WALK TO THE MADIENS WASH ROOM. THEN HE INVITES HER  
SOMEWHERE**

**THE PRINCE TAKES HER SOMEWHERE PREPARING FOR HIS BIRTHDAY. They  
dance and talk about her maker “Usually,**

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The rest of the week flew by, with me performing the same duties again, and again and again. There was no progress concerning the song and when I'd thought maybe halfway done, something would come up. My vibe to continue was dying miserably because I no longer had hopes of finding anything in the record room. It was just as the name was; Record room. The previous kings paid more attention to their personal desires and palace problems, not bothering to pen things concerning their people. I noticed one of them came close in contact with a Mami Wata, when he described vividly about the community in white, but he mentioned they were also difficult to find. This proved Okirikiri's words to be true; 'he hadn't seen her since,' he said.

After another lunch without Zina, ear splitting gossips from the girls, I went back to the record room feeling overwhelmed. As I passed the record keeper, her head stuck in her work of gluing the cover's I'd torn, I guiltily went through an aisle.

I crossed to the shelf I hadn't touched, took a book, sighed and collapsed on the ground. I hadn't opened the book when I felt a presence beside me. I managed not to shout when I looked up, but it was close. The little girl was standing, watching me with her bulging eyes.

As we stared at each other, a creep chill ran through my veins. Instantly, I knew she had been the one watching me outside my window. I shifted and peered top see if the record keeper noticed the creature, but the shelves were too high and thick. And I thought, if I couldn't see, she didn't either.

"What..er..," I started nervously.

"Aruna wants you to plait your hair," said the Oroma in her high pitched voice and I was sure Mrs. Seotu would hear it this time.

"Leave," I said finding my voice. "How did you get in here?"

"You led Aruna," Aruna said. "Aruna followed you through the hole. That was how Aruna got here." She leaned against the shelf and crossed her arms. Catching a glimpse of her underarm, I noticed crisscrossed marks, disappearing behind her back.

"You've been watching me," I said and she nodded in confirmation. "What do you want from me?"

Aruna turned with her inhuman eyes. "Is there a reason Aruna should follow you. Other than for your hair?"

"Don't answer me with another question," I said. As much as I wanted it to be true, deep down I knew no one would follow to this length to make hair. "Tell me the truth."

"Aruna tells the truth. He promised Aruna will make hair."

“Who is ...” I hesitated. “Who is he?”

“Let Aruna make hair.”

I shook my head. “You are not touching one hair on my head,” I said.

“Aruna’s mother told Aruna hair is the beauty of a woman,” she said slowly, looking at me. “No one laughs at a bad hair.”

How can something be so irritably persistent? I closed the book, and stood up, watching the creature in case of unwanted surprises. “If you excuse me, I have things to do.”

“Aruna can help find what you lost.”

“I don’t need your help,” I said sharply. “And I didn’t lose anything.”

“Aruna knows you need to find the book.”

I leaned forward, taking a long look at the creature. “There’s a boo...I mean how did know about the book?”

There was a short silence. Finally, she let her lips turn up at the corner. Her smile was sweet, happy she had gotten to me. “The song book,” she said. “Aruna knows of the song book written a long, long time.”

“Then tell me where it is.”

She raised her hands, tracing her braids down to where they rested on her neck. When she dropped it, she fully turned to face me squarely. “You must let Aruna plait first.”

“You knew I was looking for a book didn’t you. Just how long did you follow me?” My voice was thin with tension.

Aruna began skipping away to the end of the aisle, leaving giggles in her wake. Finally, she stopped when she got to the end and spoke the words I wasn’t expecting to hear.

“Since Tails,” she said and giggle again. Then disappeared to the left.

#

“Wait,” I demanded, ensuring my voice was not loud enough to attract the record keeper’s attention. I didn’t need her anymore to save me from the creature, because I was running towards it quick. If she had followed me from tails, there was a chance she knew where Fanan had taken Hanye too. The creature posing at the warden instructed I meet him but never told me where.

I followed her through a swinging door- noticing for the first time. The room was of a simple creamish color, the floors brown like the usual mud, and a chandelier of lighted candles illuminated the space. A lone shelve stood off to the side- small and portable, a huge difference

compared to the looming ones on the other side. Above was the cemented statue of an owl, its wings spread widely and eyes black beaded? It might be a color lighter than black and they seemed to be watching me. A set of table sat at the middle harboring well-arranged books, behind a pair of chairs.

“What is this place?” I asked to no one in particular. “It looks like...”

“The study,” Aruna said, perching on the edge of the table. “It used to be open to all.” She picked up a reed pen, and rotated in with her fingers. When a drop of ink dotted her wrapper, she placed it back on the table. “If you want to ask Aruna where your friend was taken, Aruna doesn’t know.”

“But you were there,” I reminded her.

“Aruna was but Aruna isn’t now.” Aruna spread her pale fingers on her laps. “Aruna only watched your village get attacked but Aruna didn’t follow.”

“So you’re really tell me, you followed for my hair?” I asked bitterly. When she didn’t say anything, answering with silence, I sank at the top of the shelve. “I wasted my time.”

“Aruna saw you for the first time with your friend. You did not see Aruna but your friend did. Aruna thought she could hide with the men in black.”- that was why Hanye looked dazed that day. “Aruna began wondering because her people were destroyed in the war. Aruna blames them for fighting alongside the regent. But Aruna doesn’t blame them for wanting to get out of the forest. To have a home, a place in Ebos.”

“How old are you?” I asked out of curiosity.

“A hundred years,” she said. “We age slower than others.”

I made noise at the back of my throat, and she went on dully. “Aruna didn’t have a purpose. Aruna had to plait hair to survive.”

“You took of their heads.”

“Not before getting paid.”

“You killed them.”

“It’s was Oroma’s do,” she said remorselessly. “It’s the reason we were casted into the forest. The regent promised us a home.”

I was watching her intently now. “What makes you think I would let you plait me hair now you’ve told me what you plan to do.”

Aruna rubbed the fallen ink and touched around her eyes. “Aruna doesn’t plan to do that if she wants to get her people back. Aruna is a step away from seeing her mother again. He promised Aruna a lot and Aruna trusts him.”

“Who?”

Aruna shook her head. “Aruna doesn’t know his name. But Aruna knows he has many powers. He tells Aruna he can do so much, I will fear him if he shows me more,” she said. “Aruna is tempted to plait because it is part of me. You should not worry, your head will stay.”

I looked at her sharply. “So what you’re saying is that you have something planned?”

“You can say that. There is a price for everything he told Aruna,” she said and jumped down from the table. She stalked across the room towards me and dragged her finger across the walls; light stains of remaining ink marked the walls. I slowly got up too, edging on the wall to place increase the distance she was trying to close. “There is a plot. A plot to make you take you to him no matter what. If you don’t terrible things will happen to Aruna.”

“Who promises and threatens Aruna. Whoever it is is lying to your face.”

Slowly, Aruna shook her head. “How would you know? Aruna knows him better than you.”

“There are people who will come look for me when they’ll find I’m missing...”

The girl laughed and it sounded like crackling flames. “Aruna too weak to take you with her. Aruna has other plans.” When she got to the bookcase, she dragged down the first lane bound in yellow leaves. She flipped through the pages, shedding leaves and bit of dust. The pages were light and filled with scribbles in ink.

My eyebrows went up. “What is that?”

“Aruna has found what you have been looking for.”

And before I could leap to make a grab, Aruna ran for the table and climbed leaving her head behind. For a moment I thought she had leapt to her death, but the head juggled and found its way back to her head. “Sorry. Aruna forgets her head falls off sometimes.”

“Fine I’ll let you plait my hair. “I stretched my hand forward, approaching her carefully. “Just give it back.”

She was looking at me with some kind of amusement. “He will give it back when you meet him.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Aruna know what she’s doing. One step away...”

“That step is not going to save my friend,” I hissed. “The song is the only way Aruna. You saw how she was taken, she’s everything to me Aruna.” I tried to persuade her the best way I could.



“Then do as he says.”

“I cannot do as he says!”

“Apparently you will. Aruna has done a good job.”

She landed flatfooted on the ground. Aruna had me running behind her, she paused at the door, then had me knock my head on the door when she closed it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A crash of thundering breakables followed a very annoyed voice. “How could they be so stupid!”

“What we do now?” another one said calmly.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know,” the person sounded tired and when I thought he was about sit when I heard a scrap of wood, another crash came louder than the previous one. “This messed things up.”

“How did it get in?”

“Their stupidity did. I should have let her stay.”

#

I woke up in a messed up room. The status was broken to many pieces and so were the sets of washed clothes undone from their folds. Chibuzor’s hands playing with the sheet of his sword was leaning against the door frame whistling. He wore a bored expression. Kamfeechi paced a little away from him, looking a bit haggard. A piece of his kaftan had a tear, what seemed like dust lined the neckline and chest. They must have found out the truth, how else would they occupy my room? The Oroma played me well. How could I have been so stupid? This was a disaster I caused, I had ever right for whatever scolding I got, I deserved it.

I unglued myself from the bed as the door swung open, Azuka walked in with a maiden holding a bucket of water. He watched me, then raised his hands above his head, the maiden walked out with her back and closed the door. This prompts Kamfeechi to stop his pacing and Chibuzor looking up.

“It’s not her fault,” Kamfeechi said before anyone else could talk. He sounded warily as if he was trying to convince himself otherwise. I’ve noticed his words of support since the first day; our link to the same maker could be the reason. “There is no way anyone would have known it came for something else.”

“It didn’t much do,” said Chibuzor in a bored voice. “We fell to it.”

“I...”

“What? Do you want to apologize?” Azuka scoffed, raising his voice. “Because I don’t think sorry will do anything.”

My ears rang. This took me back to the first time we met, the way he looked at me like I was some nasty insect crawling under his nose.

“And neither will your anger my prince,” Kamfeechi said sounding almost tried. “The best thing to do now is to think.”

“Think.” Azuka looked at him as if he spoke rubbish. “They will find out sooner than later a book is missing.” So they did know the Oroma had taken a book. “My father might be stupid at times when it came to women but never when it comes to records.” I thought the king was an all-rounder.

“That’s true. I don’t know what else to say?” Kamfeechi admitted as his grey glittered in the firelight.

“We get it back if together,” Chibuzor said and stood up, dusting his behind in whips.

“Not if we are down one person.” Azuka looked off in the distance. “I should have known...” He hesitated. Then threw his fist on the wall. I jumped.

“What person?” I asked and was answered in silence. On impulse, I looked around, and when I didn’t see Zina I frowned. Azuka told me he had her sent in concerns of the Intel- was that the reason for her absent, or was it something more? At times, I was slow to thing and Azuka never failed to remind me whenever it happens like he did now, under his breath.

Hanye called me slow too, even though she didn’t mean any harm, it just came as a passing phrase. So I shouldn’t be blamed for one of them to confirm what I thought was either wrong or right. I raised myself higher, rounded the bed until my legs swung from the frame.

Azuka sat down, his hands over his face. Kamfeechi was hovering around him, even Chibuzor looked uneasy.

“Where is Zina?” I asked, and I could tell I wouldn’t like the answer I got.

“She’s gone,” Kamfeechi whispered pained.

“Gone? Gone where?”

“It means cannot find,” Chibuzor explained.

“The Intel was a trap. You told me. I thought she could protect herself... I didn’t know what I was thinking sending her alone.” It felt Azuka disliked Zina but this confirmed he cared for her like his people, because she was part of his people. He saved her, I shouldn’t forget.

“It’s not your...”

“It is!” he screamed, jumping up. “And you are at fault for making this worse. You gave the book...”

“She took it.”

“You led her there.”

“She took it!”

“If you weren’t so stupid, you could have asked me first.”

By the time I was saying my next words, my feet walked on their own and we were standing face to face. “I want to solve this as much as you do.”

“Not if you messed things up.”

“But you messed things up too.”

“I know.” His voice was gentler this time, almost sounding like defeat.

“Truth is you’re both at fault here,” Kamfechi said. “And I partly because I brought back the letter without checking its authenticity.”

Azuka sighed in a way not befitting of a prince and truth be told, he’d never did since I’d woken up. Something pressed me from behind; seemed I’d started to fall. When I turned it was Chibuzor having his hands against my back and I allowed him lead me back to the bed. My vision was slightly hazy but it all soon cleared up before I could make anything of it. Azuka looked thoughtful, seeming like the young prince he truly was.

When the tension sizzled to the barest minimum I spoke. “Azuka?”

He looked up, eyes slightly red. “What.”

I shook my head numbly, searching for the right words to use. “Do you think we can find them?”

“Which one?”

My lips paused mid open. Choosing was not to be debated right? “Both.”

He shook his head but Kamfechi answered. “We might find the Oroma if we get the right consultation. But...” he paused. His eyes straying to the prince.

“There are no traces of Zina,” Azuka finished.

“This is a magic kingdom. There should be someone... someone who tracks things,” I said. “Right?”

“Then Fanan would have been found years ago,” said Azuka. “Kamfeechi, Chibuzor.” The called perked at the call of their names, even I listened in. “Do me a favor and keep the king from the record room.”

“What do you plan on doing?” Chibuzor asked.

“To get the right consultation.”

“He will know if you’re gone.”

“Make up a lie or something. My father falls for anything.”

#

Azuka knocked for the third time above irregular cracks. The echoes of the hits answered instead of the supposed opening of the door.

“Azuka,” I said.

He turned and looked at me. “What?”

“I don’t think his in.” The door was a surprise to me because I hadn’t expected it. The last time, it was open.

Instead of answering, he glanced at the closed door and stepped back. The door swung open inwards, steady flute tones ushered Okirikiri outside with his stick. Running his milky over us, he walked forward, pretending he hadn’t seen us or sensed our presence.

“Okirikiri. It’s me, the prince of Heads and your...”

“Have you come to gift the gods?” Okirikiri didn’t turn as he spoke. “Or did you come otherwise.”

“Otherwise,” I said truthfully.

“If you’ve come because of our tie. I do not plan to take you as my own.” Okirikiri sounded irritated and I couldn’t help the drop of my heart. I’ve long given up the longing of a father after I found I didn’t have any, Hanye was all I needed, nothing more. “Even if you’re dressed like that.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, my voice sounded harsher than I intended. “We came for something else.” Azuka sneaked a glance, behind it was a look of pity? He didn’t need to feel anything for me, he had his own things to deal with. Okirikiri turned at my words, his bare chest was covered in lines and circles from white chalk, and around an eye was a smaller circle.

“Then what did you come for?” he said loftily.

Azuka opened his mouth, and by the sneer in his eyes, I knew he was about to say something both of us weren’t going to like hearing and possibly destroy any chance of getting what we came for. “Excuse...”

“We want to find someone... something. It’s urgent,” I interrupted him.

Footsteps skid passed me, from our center, strands of hair dancing above my head and soon reached my waist. It was smell of rose that made me shuffle across, staring at the beaver eyes of my best friend. She held up a calabash, to which Okirikiri dipped his hands in, circling whatever was enclosed.

“Hanye?” I whispered.

The girl looked up, and blinked. Her face pale like bleached white. If it wasn’t for the harsh grip on my wrapper, attacking her with a hug was the next best thing.

“Stop,” said Azuka. “It’s not what you think.” He regarded her scaly back with a head nudge.

Okirikiri took out his hands from the calabash, elastic red liquid was stuck to his fingers and he licked them off in one stretch.

“You forget. What you see is not always what is,” Okirikiri said using his stick to tip the calabash towards the girl. It poured over her white wrapper, bloody red running down her front. “Azu. Fish blood. Best used for blessings.”

The girl bowed and left back to the house.

“What happens when someone touches them?” I asked out of curiosity.

“You die,” Okirikiri said, touching the dry chalk under his eye. “Now tell me, why you have come to see me.”

I stepped forward. “Do you know what an Oroma is?”

“You insult the power in me,” Okirikiri said looking like he would very much hang me upside down.

Azuka dug inside his pocket and held out a piece of hair. “It found a way into the palace and took something of the king.”

“A song book. We need to get it back.”

“Then look for it. My job ended when you were found.”

“This has nothing to do with our mission Okirikiri...”

“What if it does?” I said.

“It does?” Azuka repeated. “What exactly happened in the record room Kamsie?” So he didn’t know the importance of the book.

I shrugged off from him. “If it’s something ancient. The song I mean. It would be in a place of old records.”

“So the Oroma took the book knowing it was important. I knew something was off when an Oroma took a book.”

“She’s working for Fanan. I’m positive.”

“How?”

“She said so herself. He promised her family back.”

“The ones who had taken the Regents side,” Okirikiri confirmed.

“You should go home,” Azuka suggested. “If Fanan had sent her, then he knows you will come looking for it.”

“He’s right.” Okirikiri agreed. “I am no fortune teller but I know it will be a lost battle if you were to go yourself.”

“Who says I’m going on my own?”

Azuka looked at me and I stared him down with adamant eyes. “Stubborn and stupid.”

“It’s my fight too,” I said angrily.

Okirikiri chimed his stick. “Enough!” he bellowed in a loud voice. “I have things to do.”

“Then I’ll be quick,” I said. Azuka pushed me behind me, a gesture telling me to be quiet. But he knew how stubborn I was, said so himself. “Please tell us where it is.”

Okirikiri stared at the birds flocking in sets above us. “And why should I?”

“If you tell us this once. We promise never to disturb you.”

Okirikiri took a while to answer. “Oroma’s have lived in the Body before the war. You should know this my prince.”

“I do. But nobody has seen nor heard,” Azuka confirmed. “Until that day.” He was referring to the day I saw her for the first time. “It must have taken some convincing to get it to work for the one who swiped out its clan.”

Okirikiri sat. He undid a knot in his wrapper, taking out a handful of seeds, threw them on the ground. The seed scattered untidily, but still within his reach. Speaking under his breath, he stretched forward, matching a seed with a stray one. He continued matching them, then his

hands paused above them. “The Oroma lives within the great waters. It’s a dangerous place even for you prince Azuka.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“The great waters have been blocked off by my father. It borders the dark art’s villages.”

“There were dark art villages?”

“Remember I told you, Zina is half dark? She used to live there with her parents before the raid.” Azuka looked calmer now but seemed vigilant, like the time he slashed my skin. “It’s to west.”

“And there’ll be guards situated at every end.”

“Then you should find a way.” Okirikiri cleared his throat and started gathering his seeds.

“Wait,” I interrupted. “How do we lure it?”

“Lure?”

“The Oroma. I don’t think it’ll come to us willingly.”

Azuka eyed me. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

I shook my head. “What if she doesn’t and wants us to search? There should be a plan be, right?”

“Not so stupid after all,” said Okirikiri unkindly. “Oroma’s are creatures who loves a good hairstyle since the beginning of time. The only way to lure them out is doing what they hate.”

“She might have my head?” Although she mentioned she wouldn’t.

“True,” said Okirikiri hastily. “You can either go with a bad hairstyle or go with nothing. Do whatever you want.” He quickened the pace at which he picked his seed, shoving them back into place, he rose.

“Are there no other ways?”

“No.”

“You have to help us Okirikiri,” I pleaded. “We must get the book in time.”

Okirikiri looked at me up and down, his blank face never breaking into anything sympathetic. “I did my best.” When he started walking away, Azuka stepped in front of him stopping whatever journey he was about taking. Okirikiri shifted, Azuka just stepped in the way again. “I have places to get to my prince.” I knew from his annoyed look, he wasn’t too happy about his methods. But he was the prince, he’d succumb.

“Where can we find the hair makers,” Azuka asked.

“Do you not know where things are in your kingdom?” Azuka looked flustered by his words. Then he directed his next question to me. “Have you decided?”

“Not yet but if I go through with it...”

“Just tell us,” Azuka interrupted impatiently. “There’s no time to think about anything.”

“Not if it involves me getting dead,” I said.

Okirikiri sighted, probably tired of having us disturb his ‘businesses. The birds chip in the distance, flocking away from the depth of the trees. “The city of eye. Not far from the sign.”

“Do you know where that is?”

“I think I do.” Azuka looked satisfied.

“What about the guards? We need something to distract them,” I said.

“You.” Okirikiri nudged his head. “You can sneak in, make a bait-something to distract them from their post. You should be good at things like that. There should be a rotation at midnight,” he said, reaching into his head band. “It will help if problem arises.” He hands out a small ball of cloth to me, and I who stared at it, refusing to take.

“What is this?” I asked. “How is this going to help us?”

He stared pointedly at me, then tossed it to Azuka who catches it effortlessly. “Take a pinch and blow it the moment you cross the great water.”

“We will need things like this to show us truth,” Azuka agreed. “Chances are bush babies will man the vicinity.

“You both need to be sure where to go. I do not enjoy news of your death and neither will your future.”

“Don’t worry.”

“I do not worry,” he said. “Now may I leave my prince?”

Azuka stepped aside. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Thank you.”

“One more thing,” Azuka said. Is there a name for this...”

“Akator,” Okirikiri said and jiggled his stick upwards. With a scoff, he finally walked away without looking back.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two hours later, Azuka and I crossed the sign bearing the name ‘the city of eye.’ We spent our time making little or no conversations, probably because Azuka might still be annoyed I came along. As Okirikiri directed, there was a tall solid building a few steps into the city, the grey roof fell perfectly on the hole in window, and the gable, covering the least amount of spiral drawings on the walls. There was a bench out front wonderfully glued to the wall by the ropes connecting it to a pillar. The cottage stood at the edge of city, dusty sands whirled upfront covering up one’s vision of the other buildings.

“This is the place,” Azuka said, caressing the ends of one of the drawings. He traced them with a guarded look and stepped away.

We were both looking at the heavy lock, even swords won’t break. “You should be concerned,” I told him.

“Of what?”

“Someone noticing you.”

“Who would tell what they’ve not seen. I rarely come into the city with my title and father has not yet introduced me as the next king so...”

“Until your birthday?”

“Until my eighteenth birthday.”

It was midafternoon. The sky was blue and the air was dry and still. A rustic sound of grinding stones mixed with the playing of slow drums proved there were people inside.

“Go on. Knock.”

“Why should I knock?” Azuka said. He released a breath thick with color. “I did the first time.”

He rubbed his hands together and I was forced to do too. It was starting to get chilly. Then someone burst through the door, the unbroken lock verifying it had been opened. The lock jingled upon impact with the bench, prompting a young cat skidding out with a pronounced meow. On seeing us, it made a sharp turn to the opposite side, disappearing into the thick mist. Sharply pointed object poked out from inside, a rather thick Silhouetted woman emerged. “And never come back!” she yelled into the path the cat took.

“Um...Hello,” I said. “Are you the hair maker?” Carefully, I searched for a sign, or anything, an indication on her face, hair that she was the one. I felt ridiculous asking.

She regarded us curiously, flashing a deafening scowl. “Did the king send you? Because if he did, tell him on behalf of my household, we will never war practice.” She changed the direction of her stick, and we had to shift so we didn’t get hit.

“Mama, don’t scare the customers off,” a tender voice said from inside. A slender woman rounded the thick woman, standing in front with a smile. She was younger than her, the flat necklace thin as thread was the only indication they were related. “Can’t you see, they’re only customers?”

The woman eyed us. “I hope you’re right Ada.” Then retreated back inside with a whip of her stick.

“Please, do not mind my mother,” Ada said with pleading eyes. “She just scared, that’s all.”

“Of the king,” Azuka said.

“Of everything. Food, clean water.” Then she laughed. “You should see where we store water nowadays. I’m sure you know about this. Sorry I get chatty when I meet new people.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“So you’re planning for a new journey?” she asked.

I looked down when I realized she’d been staring at me. Azuka and I exchanged a passing glance. “Somewhat?”

“Then you’re the hair maker.”

“Yes. I am the hair maker.” She pushed in the door which had started to shut on its own, gesturing in with the other. “You should come in before the cold freezes you over.”

Azuka edged into the doorway, sizing the girl with his eyes. “What do you take for your hair making?”

She crinkled her brows. “Cowries.” Her hands shot out, pointing to the sword staked to his side. “It’s either my mother is right or you’re not who you say you are.”

“What about you? How do we know your head doesn’t come off?”

“Come off.” Then she laughed. “Are you crazy? I’m not some walking dead.” Azuka looked faintly flushed. “Just hold on to that tight. Hands move in shadows.”

Ada started inside and a surprised looking Azuka stood there. “What was that for?” I asked.

“You can’t be too careful,” he said and pushed me in gently. “People move in bodies too.”

“You mean shadows.”

Azuka looked bored. “Whatever.”

I shook my head. “Just try not to make everyone look like a... what do you call it?”

“Just go in Kamsie.”

Inside wasn't must to look at. The room was small and almost empty of life. Ada's mother was over at the willowing curtain watching them with hooded eyes as she slowly rotated her cup calabash in her hands. A string curved across to each end, clothing were pegged to it and so were plastic bags. A burning fire wood under a furnace welcomed a pot a man was shoving into it. The light from outside shone on the two sets of tables and chairs where I'd just noticed, two children were shoving handful of yams greedily into their mouth.

“Food doesn't come easy to us too. We have to save it all for the children.” Ada picked up a basket of clothes off the ground.

I looked at them painfully. “You give them everything?”

“Not everything but more. Some days we stay on empty stomachs. Papa I'm going upstairs,” she called out but the man made no indication he heard her. “He can't hear.”

“Then why call out?”

She shrugged. “I'm used to it.”

“How did... did he get like that?” Azuka asked looking solemn.

“War practice,” she said. “That's why mother is against the war practice. We hide when the guards come around. And if they did catch us, they meet hot whips on their back.”

“But isn't that dangerous?”

“It is.” She handled the bottom of her skirt, pulling it up to her knees. The mark was dark, covered in tiny bristles of stones. “We just beg out of it and offer them some of the money I make.”

I couldn't help not look at Azuka when she started up the stairs. His eyes were glazed over, knuckles popped in a tight fist. Azuka looked abashed. “I should not be here.”

“This is not your fault,” I assured him.

Ada's room was at the top of a rickety stairs. The boys came from nowhere, running up to catch up with Ada and I immediately regretted gripping the railings for support. A chunk of wood came off with sticky substance which was wet against my fingers.

“Mama,” he said, tugging on Ada's skirt. “Is daddy coming home soon?” I glued the chunk back into place and wiped it on the wall or so I thought.

“Take your hands away.” Azuka snapped.

Ada sighed and ruffled the boy’s non existents hair. “Soon baby.”

“But when.”

She drew his cheek softly and kissed it. “If you and your brother promise to always be good boys, he will come with presents too.” The children erupted in a cheerful giggle, running back down and this time I made sure to hold on to nothing to avoid surprises.

The room was simple. A clothing rack, a raffia mat and a wooden stool. A small-looking figurine of two persons was neatly carved and sat on top of the window plane. They were in a position where they bore into each other’s eyes with looks of admiration. One of the figures was a woman with an open laugh, her hands wearing the same cuffs on Ada’s wrist, the other which I figured was a man for his sculpted muscles underneath the sleeveless shirt. Ada placed the basket beside the door.

“Di. My husband.”

I turned to see Ada staring longingly at the figurines from where she stood behind me. Glancing around, I noticed Azuka was gone, he hadn’t followed me in.

“What happened to him?”

She tried to smile. “Gone.”

“Oh.” I stared at them again. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She went over to the stool looking sincere. “He ran away.”

“To where?”

Dragging the stool to the center of the room, she shook her head. “I don’t know. We were too much of a burden maybe?”

I was short of words. Every words of comfort seemed to disappear from my lips as I knew myself it will do nothing but to make matters worse. I knew how it felt when you were left alone, how it felt to yearn for so much and you later found you were not wanted. I hugged my arms around my torso, trying to wade out the rotten thoughts I was beginning to have.

Ada went to the clothing rack, taking and arranging a set of metal combs in her hands, her bracelets clanking together. Her movements were stiff, her lips quivering slightly and she tired as much as possible to stay on her feet, but she was swaying.

“I think you should sit,” I said.

Ada sniffed. “No. I’m okay.”

“I know how you feel,” I said trying to offer comfort. “I was left too.”

“Seems we all have our own fair share of stories.”

“Letting it out can make you feel better.” Crying, shouting was always better than bottling in the pain you felt inside. Hanye always stayed through those times with me when I felt miserable and in turn I took hers. It brought comfort to both of us to let everything out.

“Being left alone is the worst thing to do to a person. Look at how we suffer on the king's reign,” she said examining the combs in her hands. When she turned, her face was striking with tears. “We lived in the ear and we had a son. I was pregnant with the other boy when he left in search of food in the breast. He usually did that. Look for fishes and come back in a week. But he hadn't taking his net. He was a fisherman, he should take his net.” She paused and I swallowed. “I just thought he had a spare to use. Then I heard bronze statues were missing from the palace and my home was raided.”

“How did he get in?”

She ran a hand against her tears. “Tunnels? I don't know. I hear there were some dug during the war,” she said. “I had nowhere to live and my father had just become deaf. I didn't want to burden them during these times, but they insisted. I lie to the boys he works of the palace now.” I could see what would be the better excuse, the servants are not allowed to go out. “I think I'm starting to believe it myself.”

“You still keep this,” I said, nudging my head towards the figuring.

“Except the net, this is what I have left of him,” she strode to the window and picked it up. Twisting it in her hands, she raised it up and took a sniff. “Still smells like him. I'm not ready to let go.” Was I ready to let go too? The basket was something I kept to remind me of what I didn't have, but now I didn't have it anymore, have I truly given up the idea of being left alone?

“My father didn't want me....” I told her the story I knew not the one that have come to be. To be honest, I didn't want Hanye to believe I left her, we were each other's family and family stuck together.

“What about your mother?”

“She died.” It was what I could come up with fast enough.

Ada exhaled irritably. “That's sad. As mother say, ‘Whip him with a stick until he apologizes’.”

“Your mother is vicious.”

“I know.” She laughed a little.

I joined in and Azuka reappeared with the boys holding on to his sword. The sword wore a circle of flowers around the case, and he seemed annoyed. “I told you there were hands in the shadows.”

“Who would think they will be children who loves swords?” he said while pushing the children away, bodily, and mentally I thought. His eyes focused on the boy nibbling at the tip of the seeth. “Take them off.”

Ada quickly placed the combs on the stool, going over to her boys, she tried wrenching them away-which she was finding difficult. “Come on. Let go.”

“Can we keep it with the others?” one of the boys said in excitement.

“Yes mama, can we. Can we?” the other spoke equally.

“No you can’t. They are dangerous.”

Finally, with a whimsical whimper, the boys let go and soon, Ada had them out the room which Azuka was glad with his buoyant sigh. She dusted hands like she’d finished a dirty job and said. “I’m so sorry. They can’t help it.” Azuka slid his poking blade back in, with a turn. “So what hairstyle do you need?”

“I want something ugly.”

“Ugly!” she exclaimed. “Why do you want something ugly?”

“Just...”

“Fine. If that’s what you want.”

#

There were lots of tugging, combing thereafter. It was a miracle I stayed calm despite the feeling of my scalp on the verge of splitting in twos and the never ending chatter of the hair maker. She was indeed rather chatty like she said. Nothing was hazardous than trinkets of saliva mixed with a burning head. I’d seen Azuka flinch when she took three pieces of my hair between her fingers, dragging it at length- my scalp along with it and when she finished braiding a string, a soft ball of my hair fell to my lap.

The time of the day was unknown to me when she started combing the middle, as the mist thickened covering up the world outside. My bottom began to hurt. Soon I forgot about everything else except thoughts of the boy watching nothing but the still thinking mist. What was his thoughts drifting to? Something had changed too. A cold crystal seed was brewing at the bottom of my stomach and at the tip of my tongue, I let out a scream unable to keep it in with that last final tug.

She called out for a bucket of water to be brought to her. Her mother walked in soon cradling a bucket. She placed it on the ground with her hawk eyes maneuvering all over; either her eyes were naturally like that, or she was still suspicious of us, and I have Azuka’s sword to blame. She left and Ada went to the water, calling me over.

“You will be able to see your reflection in it,” she said. “Clearer than normal. It has mother’s touch.”

The moment I closed up space, I felt a wave of cool air enveloping me, along with the smell of sunny grasses and young roses. A big done was made out of my hair, spiral braids reached the back, disappearing to where I couldn’t see, ushering single braids sticking out in all places. There were stripes of cloths sewn to one side- I wondered why I hadn’t noticed. Strange dots emanated from the buckets bottom, rising up to cloud the once clear liquid.

“It didn’t last very long,” Ada added. “What do you think?”

I raised myself from my crouching position. “It’s ugly.”

“Very ugly,” Azuka echoed, pulling one of the single braids. I moved, dusting his hands away.

“It’s what you wanted,” she said. “Although I don’t know why...”

“It’s perfect. Thank you,” I said. “How much do we owe?”

She knelt down on her mat, pulling my hair attached to the tips of the comb. “I usually take seven but since I did something I don’t like, I’ll take five instead.” Azuka moved forward, digging into his pocket, he placed a handful of cowries on the stool. It was more than she asked for, more than she usually took. She looked at him with raised eyebrows, the stretched forward to take it, counting it. “Fifty!” she exclaimed. “This is too much.”

Azuka placed his hands on his seath and was moving towards the door. “No need to thank me.”

“I’m not tanking you.” Hurriedly, she separated the number she needed, stood up and stretched her hands forward. “Here, I’ve taken what I need.”

“Not specifically. You need it more than I do.”

“There’s nobody who doesn’t need to...” Placing my hands on her shoulder, I hadn’t expected her to fight against them. “I hate pity,” she spoke calmly, brushing my arms aside. “Don’t do that?”

“What?”

“Both of you are giving me that look. I had to live with that look when my Di left, from neighbors, even my parents. I would know, I look at the children the same way. It’s not easy growing up without a father.” It really isn’t.

“Then give us something in return instead,” Azuka said.

The girl was taken aback and so was I. “Azuka,” I scolded.

“What?”

“You don’t give and take back.”

He shrugged. “Might as well do that if she’s not willing to collect.” Then directed his next question towards her. “What can you offer?”

Ada gaped, opening her mouth and closing, unable to say anything. I was sure she wanted the money more than she let on, but pride was what she couldn’t abandon. “I don’t know-“

“How about weapons? You mentioned you father participating in the war practice.”

“We do,” She muttered, returning her stretch. “Outside the back. In the shed.”

“Good,” said Azuka, impressed.

#

The shed looked abandoned, surrounded by tall weeds fine-tuning the intensity of the weird aura emanating. Uniquely built with swollen bricks, the square shape resembled a monster in the mist, and the arch windows like hollow eyes. For the last minute, Ada had been fighting a defeating battle with the padlock leaving her breathless. She rattled it for the umpteenth time, the door and the sturdy padlock. “Mother wanted to keep father away from his tools.” She grunted, tugging to a defeat. “If the keys weren’t thrown out. It’ll be a lot easier,” she said, glancing at us.

Azuka took out his sword, whipped it and cool ice formed slowly to the tip. “Let me take care of it.”

I watched him slash the lock in half, wrench it down, push it with his bulgy arm to which the muscle reacted by being stiff. The door opened with a loud screech, cobwebs styled his dark hair leaving patches of white. “It needed a push,” he said, running his hands over his hair.

“Is he always like this?” Ada whispered.

“Like what?”

“Cool,” she said. “You’re lucky to have a Di like that. Caring, handsome...”

“He’s not my husband!” I interrupted, mortified.

“Well he’s something. I see the way he looks at you.”

I stared at her. She was smiling up to me in hopeful desire I was going to admit something that wasn’t true. Just as I was about to correct her further, a loud voice came from the house. “Ada! New customers,” her mother called.

She sighed. “Duty calls.”

“Thank you Ada,” I said.



“No thank you.” Ada attacked me in a brief hug, her eyes crinkling at the side. “Tell your Di to be careful. It be used against him someday.”

“He’s not my...”

“Bye!” she said abruptly, running towards the house. “Hope you find your father.”

“Hope you find your Di,” I said but she was already gone.

“Are you not coming in?” Azuka’s profile was covered in the mass of darkness and his eyes were like two dotted whites.

“You could have been a lot nicer. It’s what kind people do.”

“I was,” he grumbled.

“Right,” I muttered, following him into the shed to the unlit candle. The Candle was recognizable despite the darkness, the white peeking with ominous intensity. Sharply, it came to life illuminating the space with fiery light and I realized soon after Azuka’s hands above it, but there was no indication he had lit it. I bit my lips. “Did you do that?”

Azuka took his hands back. “No,” he said, turning to stare with confusion. “I think you did.”

“That’s not possible. I haven’t released the block yet.”

“Maybe it’s like that time. It comes whenever it wants,” he said. “It’s unstable.”

“That’s why we need the book.”

A scenes of untidy screams attacked my vision the moment I took the room in. The smell of candle wax and damp cloth enveloped me in the midst of stacked piles of stuffy bags, spilling of crumpled leaves. It would be next to impossible to find weapons in the mess. It dawned on me, I have been to many places throughout my life- Hanye and I, somehow we’ve toured the whole of tails doing one thing or the other, mostly stealing actually. Strangely, the bags were moving slightly, tiny objects peeked from the shadows.

“It’s no surprise rat found their way in,” said Azuka noticing. Just then, a rat skidded out, running to the door. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

He pointed to my hands pinching my neck. “That. You do it anytime you’re afraid and uncomfortable.”

“I do?” I see the way he looks at you, Ada mentioned. Had he really been watching me? What did that tell of him exactly? “I didn’t notice.”

“You never do,” he said, moving forward, prompting another rat respond. “I heard it could be dangerous at times. Not to notice I mean. It was the first thing I was taught being the prince. Watch more and say less.” He knelt down by one of the bags, and I thought for a moment if I were guilty as he said. He shifted the bags, pressed his ear to the ground, listening and waiting for something to happen.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Aren’t we supposed to open the bags?”

Azuka held up a finger. Then placed his hands on the ground, rapidly continuing to feel whatever he wanted to feel. “I noticed when I moved the bags. It should have been heavier if the weapons were kept in.”

“Tell me again why we need weapons.”

“So that you don’t die.”

“I won’t die.”

“You will if we go unprepared.”

“Should we ask where the weapons are?” I asked fed up with watching him search in vain.

“I can find it.”

“By pressing your hands on the ground. I don’t think you’ll find anything.”

“You forget the marked ones are special,” he said. “There’s this game I played when I was a lot younger with Zina.”

“You two really had a thing together.”

“And she took it as something else,” he said. “I would hide whatever I could find- old paper books, food, nails. I’ll teach her to find it this same way. Got it!” Azuka took out his sword and touched it the tip at a cracked spot below the candle whose wax had started dotting the ground. With a sneaky noise a portion rose, nails flew to my direction and I had to move to avoid getting hit. He lifted the lid up with a grunt, revealing a disorderly sets of weapons- three of them shaped like Azuka’s sword but rusty and dark with dust.

“This was...”

“Surprised?”

“Yes,” I said. These thing were possible in Heads and not tails. “But what can these do. Their rusty.”

“Better than nothing.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In front of the high and mass sturdy rocks spanning through a straight way were I could see a dark shadows shading as sprout, guards littered without an indication to vacate the palace. Surely, they've been there since to guard though their life's, with their bland faces and rocked muscles.

"There's no way we're going to get past unnoticed," he said pointedly. "Not if we knock them out – with a hard rock maybe."

"Rock are hard--"

"I know," he said not appreciating my deadpanned reply. "It's high you show me how thieftly you are."

"After you your highness."

He groaned. "Now you regard me of my true status in the face of danger," he said. "I thought you like to slam head first into things without thinking."

"Not necessarily. I've always shown you the respect you deserve," I said. "When you truly deserved it."

"Like now," he said slipping into a frown.

"Like now."

Azuka shook his head. "This should be easier for you than for me. You're an expert."

"Yes. With a smaller number- two, three not," –I pointed from where we hid, behind a ton of bushes, at the fourteenth guards who looked ready to swipe at anyone who defiled the kings orders. "It's too much."

"You could take them yourself," I suggested. "I'm sure you can with that sword of yours."

Azuka nodded. He had gone alert probably because i'd just satisfied his ego. "I can."

"But you won't."

"Like you, I haven't taken on this much number before," he said. "Perhaps we can work together." I haven't heard the word together on something Hanye and I did together, I suddenly felt the same rush course through me. "We can create a diversion."

"I can't fight." I felt impelled to let him know about that slight detail if he hadn't already.

“I know,” he agreed. “You cannot fight. But you can run or sneak. Whatever you prefer.” He started inching away to a stand.

“Wait,” I said panicked. “What are you doing?”

“Right now, we are going to do something I haven’t done since I met Chibuzor.” I wondered how long he’d known Chibuzor, was he some pathetic child, like Zina when they first met. Or was he related to a chief, explaining his closeness with the prince. The prince has stories, Zina said. I wonder how many. Azuka had been speaking to me while my thoughts were occupied. “-move on the note.”

“Sorry what!”

“You haven’t been listening, have you?” He inclined an eyebrow, almost disappearing under his hair. My face felt hot getting caught with my thought and worse of all, he was looking at me in a way that suggested he had the faintest of ideas it was about him.

“What did you say?” I managed to croak out.

He released an annoyed sigh. “I can’t believe I’m going to have to repeat myself.”

“For our sake.”

“I’m going to create a diversion by running out,” he said. “This will get their attention. Then I urge you to count to five before running straight forward, across the rock. You must move west where you’ll see a tree. Wait for me there.”

“There are many trees.”

“You’ll know the right one.”

“What if some stay behind? I don’t think they’ll be stupid enough to move towards one single prey. And won’t they see your face?”

“Just do as I say Kamsie.”

“Bur...” I tried to say but he was already on his way.

The hot wind was stirring itself to the now empty space, the leaves dancing to the slow and steady through which the winds blew. My heart was in my throat the moment I spotted Azuka tiptoeing ever so carefully, through the tall trees, his eyes watching the movements of the oblivious guard. And I say again, if I weren’t so much of a coward, I would have stirred head first into the den of wolves, and once again I will just this time, I have a number to count to. Knowing Hanye, she would have devised a strong means like that time when we stole the red pouch, not that Azuka’s means weren’t strong enough, but his plan could go the wrong way. It was a matter of luck, chance and error.

Azuka was waving fantastically at me. “Get back,” he hissed loud enough for me to hear but too low for the guards to notice. I pulled back, going under, my eyes peeking like a hunters wanting to catch a prey. I wondered how he was going to outrun the fourteen of them, especially with that sword on his waist-if it weight as he looked, he’d get caught in no time.

I watched him, a glint flickered in his eyes. For a moment I noticed his lips spread into a fine line, I thought it might have been a sign of his utmost distress of his outrageous plan. But the, he raised his hands over his eyes and ran forward. No one needed to tell me to start my counting from then. The guards noticed the stranger, thankfully they call lunged forward when he made a turn, showing his side with the sword. A very clever move. One. I swallowed down a spittle when they gained closer toward the figure, he cleverly ran in zigzags confusing his chasers. Two. Some unable to hold their grip to the ground fell, but they got up just immediately continuing their chase. They all had their blades out by them, and I thought if they had powers of their own. Their lack of strings of colors substances of their blades was confirmation enough, they themselves weren’t gifted or they possess too little. But one can tell they were all the same, by the line glittering in the moonlight. Three.

I ran forward on the last count. The water lived up to its name when I closed distance with the stony steps I’d have to climb. Nothing was to be seen beyond the waters, just the rock disappearing at the edge-it looked like an edge. The stones were narrow, chocked with water; obviously around, and some glazing the top. I would slip, and maybe I would die. Too late to go back now, I said to myself as my foot stepped on the third stone which was in fact the dead sought of slippery. My balance was failing me, my feet’s wiggled like the flames under a dipping pot. Fortunately, the next one was void of the slippery nature the other possessed and I used that to maintain my stance on the others until I reached the last. Throughout, my head had been unable to get away from not wanting to plummet to my death, so I was oblivious to the face staring down at me.

Correction, a carved face staring down at me. It didn’t take long for me to figure out it was the tree, Azuka wanted me to find. It was amongst other trees- fairly larger and brooding. Closer now, the carved figure looked vaguely familiar.

“Fanan.” Azuka came up to me clearly looking like he wanted to wrench the eyes of the figure with his foot. “It’s his place.”

“This is Fanan?” I gulped unable to turn away. Obviously, his skin wasn’t green, and his eyes were closed, lips sealed, nose welcoming colorful butterflies in and out. There was a tulip growing on the head, looking like a crown of a king. He was a king, I shouldn’t forget it and I dare say, he was and is the prince of darkness. “I think I’ve seen him somewhere before,” I muttered intending for my ears only but Azuka had heard it well enough.

“Of course you have,” he said. “He plagues my dreams too.” I turned to him sharply, then pointed to the faintest of all blackness under his eyes. “I told you I’d seen his eyes. Those evil...”

“They are my eyes too,” I said offended.

He shrugged. “Not totally.”

“How do we get in?” I asked. “I don’t see any point of entrance.”

“We enter through the mouth,” he said, indicating to the tightened lips of the tree. “We have to get eaten by it.”

“That’s not funny,” I pointed out.

“My intention was not to make you laugh,” he corrected.

“If we get eaten we will die.”

“You will die because of your ridiculous hair,” he said and started for the mouth. Staring at his broad back, I saw his shoulders shake a bit. Impulsively, I touched the hair. I hope I wouldn’t lose my head.

“Wait,” I said, hurrying to catch up.

There was a heat of excitement surrounding him and I was torn between several options. Getting closer to his goal outdid the others, and outdid mine too. What was my other goal actually? I didn’t think I had any except saving Hanye from Fanan. I was positive once I’d be able to unlock the block, I’d be able to save my friend and return to our life in tails- we would have to look for the other children and rebuild what we lost and Azuka, would finally be able to rid his country of evil.

There was a heightened nervousness within me, beating at the top of my head-not from the pains of combing- and the pulse in my wrist. Azuka had slipped his sword into the mouth he called entrance, tugging with mustered strength, he pulled down trying to wrench it open. It would do us great displeasure, if the Oroma or the bush babies or something worse were to jump out the second he succeeded. I stepped backwards just in case.

Something came out from the within but it wasn’t what I expected- glad it wasn’t. Weeds grew stuck to the tongue like carpet, and it exposed the longer it spread. It was narrow, enough to have fit into the mouth, apart from the overgrown weeds, there were-

“Bones,” Azuka said flatly. “From the raid.”

“Transcendent bones?”

“What else.”

I swallowed. The way they pricked like greys on cloth, like sticks on old wood gave me the faintest of ideas how messy the raid was. Azuka hadn’t been there, perhaps it could be Zina’s parent’s bones.

We slipped inside, with me avoiding contact with either the bones and the weeds, Azuka just cleared his way with whips of his blade. “How do you do it?” I asked.

He glanced without turning. “Do what?”

“Be you,” I said. “You do things with precision and without fear.” I thought of the way he ran in front of danger; brought in a human without batting an eye, stirred the guards away knowing he could have been seen, and lie to his father’s face.

“That’s a lie.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I just grew up that way,” he said and didn’t make any indication to say anything further. So I decided to continue myself. “Tell me about you.”

“I believe you know a lot.”

“Not enough.”

“Are you always this chatty?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Azuka waited for her to climb in. “What do you want to know?” He sighed. “As long as it’s not personal.” Then he added when I said nothing, still contemplating if I should ask. “Well?”

“It is personal,” I said and he groaned immediately. “Who is Kosi?”

The corners of Azuka’s mouth twitched. “What made you think I would answer such question? This hardly seems like a place for private discussions. Jump.” He nodded to the bottom.

“I’ll break my legs,” I argued, taking a spot beside him at the end of the tongue. It was at least a meter high from where we were. Down was an expenditure of cap mushrooms, at the edge of an uneven staircase introducing several other tall ones. They gave light to the space, the mushroom that is, with their reddish glow mixed with their white dots.

“No. You won’t break your legs.”

“Okay.” I mustered enough courage and jumped with a push I hadn’t asked for. A shriek left my lips and I fell in. Azuka jump in right after and I heard a sound of the mouth locking us in. “What was that for!”

“Just thought you needed a little help,” he mused. Then stretched out a hand out for me to take.

“Humph.” I rolled my eyes and stood on my own. None caring, he returned his hands to his side. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“How so,” he said feigning ignorance. “Fine. Kosi is my elder brother.”

I froze, staring at the light’s illumination on his face lines. He wore a hooded expression on his face, designed with hard lines around his chin. “You have a...”

“He’s dead,” he said moving forward. No wonder everyone seemed tense about it when I asked. “And I killed him.” What did one say when dealing with a loss? I’m sorry didn’t pose as the right words of comfort.

“How?” I heard myself asking.

“I don’t feel like talking about it,” he said. Even though he shrugged it off like he usually did things, there was something to it, something he was keeping a secret. Maybe it’s been the short time they’ve spent together that gave her the faintest of ideas or it was something more. My insides leaped a bit.

“You can tell me.”

“Look...” while turning he froze himself. His mouth opened and closed at the same time and when he was able to manage a speech he said, “Do not move.”

The urgency in his tone had me looking down for his gaze were set on something under my feet. I swallowed and forced myself to draw back on instinct defying his previous warning. The string tightened, my legs feeling the sting of the sharp spikes of the veins.

“I told you not to move.”

“What did you expect,” I said. “I stay when I see a vein choking my legs.”

His eyes answered with a yes. I knew I should have stayed put. I held still, just as he moved closer but when his hands accidentally touched the bare skin of my legs I stopped breathing. The shock came not from the veins but from the warm hands working the veins. We were close like the time I helped him with his arm and when his body heat became overwhelming, I acted on instincts. I moved.

The vine jerked me backwards with a harsh tug. Pulling me along until I was stumbling on my feet. Eventually, I fell to the ground on my stomach and I could see the panicked look across Azuka’s face before I was pulled into a nest of leaves in diagonal lines with my arms reaching for anything to hold. “Azuka!” I called out, helplessly. “Azuka! Help!”

Just as I heard rushed footsteps towards me and the faint call of my name, the vine gave a vicious tug and I went tumbling around a tumbler of stones, narrowly avoiding getting hit. The vine had a mind of its own or scarily, was controlled by someone who knew what they wanted.



“Kamsie!” the call seemed distant.

I was deafened by my own scream when I was off again. Cutting right across a den of bush babies, I knew I was doomed. They clawed from where they stood looming above me, slobby goo at the corner of their mouth. If they wanted, they could have torn me to pieces, battered my skin until I was reduced to nothing but buttered meat. It would have been best if my powers became unstable now. But we can’t always get what we want.

It kept pulling me to the end, by then my throat had become scratty. It tore me across a row refusing me a breather, then to sharp turn. From the ground, I was launched into the air, I let out a scream enough to wake up the entire heads and as it hurtled me to the pool of white, strangled screams filled my ears.

The pool was milkish and resembled quick sand, not like water but could make a person sink. If not for the vine holding me firm, I would have been that very person. I froze when I heard voices from the shadows.

“I think it’s right,” a voice said.

“Count on it. He promised,” another said.

For a panicked moment I thought they were going to come towards me. Azuka tore through the pinnacle of stems, looking bloodied from top to bottom, his sword out seething drips of a mixture ice and blood. His breathing was labored, a scratch on his cheek. He turned his face to the side and spit. Fighting that many bush babies must have opposed difficult. “Are you alright,” he said, walking forward. When I looked at his eyes, they were glittering with annoyance, perhaps of me for defying his orders.

I nodded in response. He took out the blade we had taken from the shed, and held it out in front of him. I spoke slowly. “Don’t you think you should help me?” I asked. “I’m rather preoccupied.” The liquid-hardly a liquid was sticking in places it shouldn’t, and my hands would not get to top even the tip of the blade if I tried.

“And what would we do if I were stuck in too?” he pointed out fatly. “The babies-dead babies actually will do nothing to help.”

“You don’t have to speak like that.”

“I can and I will. I told you not to move,” said Azuka.

“I could help...” I started almost spitting out more than I wanted.

“You couldn’t help what!” He inched an eyebrow up daring me to speak, give him a reason that justified my actions. But I was tongue tied, the only movement I could make was to bite it hard. “I thought so. Now you take the sword because I am obviously not coming in.”

“Then how can I get out of my sticky situation?”

He let out a loud boisterous laughter and I stared at him with so much displeasure, his laugh turned to soldiering giggles. “I’ll throw it to you,” Azuka said and added in between his giggles at my expense. “Metals do not stick to flubber. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.” So that what was it was, ‘flubber’.

“Fine,” I grumbled, but so quietly he didn’t seem to hear me. He was staring at me, probably waiting for a louder reply. “Fine. Give it to me.”

“That’s what I thought I heard.” Azuka moved back giving enough space to get the sword to me. He kicked the rusted sword against his shin, then tossed it with a gasp towards my direction. Instead of catching it, I scurried away from its path causing it to make a promising drop on the flubber. And as Azuka pointed out, it floated, no atom of goo stuck to the metal grating of its brown coat. “This is how the future of Heads catches a sword,” Azuka mocked.

“It could have shattered my head.”

“A not rusted sword could have,” he said. “But a rusted one barely leaves a mark.”

I half held a breath after a swift grab of the sword, bent low enough to see the vines on my legs. I worked my way by cutting and pulling and tugging for a good minute until I was freed. I swam my way back to Azuka, and out.

A thin smile had formed at the corners of Azuka lips watching my attempts of ridding myself of some of the stickiness on my arms, legs...

As if he heard my inner chatter, he said, “And face.”

A loud thump made me start and I turned to see if someone else were here. I’d forgotten about the voices I heard in a chatter, and I wondered if they were close by. I took a moment to get acquainted with the new environment; we were in a swallow, topless space, tents (worn with years) were in rows but all wrenched with their invaluable slump. There was a place seemingly resembling a shine with its high stairs and flimsy red clothes. Tins were crashing against each other on their own without a suitable reason, overhead raffia baskets big enough to house the children at the orphanage loomed the obvious floating book unguarded. Or not.

“We must go that way,” I pointed out. With the baffled look he welcomed me with was enough to tell me he had seen it too.

“Wait...” Azuka held my arm. “There must be a reason why you were led here. Perhaps,” – he paused to stare at my hair. “It worked.”

“We can’t be certain but you make sense.”

“I always do.”

“Shuu...” I wished it came from me but it hadn’t. “I need it clean and dusted for the ceremony.”

“But that isn’t in about a week.”

“I need it now. More than ever...” with that the voices receded. Echoes of something closing filled my ears, and I wondered if we were heard before we were seen.

I glanced at him almost absently and he bested a forlorn look in his eyes. “What is it?”

“I figured Fanan would have more people working for him, more than I should know. Definitely there will be people who think he is right, people sick enough to weigh their advantages more than their disadvantages.”

“Like the Oroma. How many do you think he has?” I asked.

“More than I imagine,” he said. “But the truth is everyone has their problems to solve.”

“Contradicting,” I said dryly.

Azuka turned to me. “Not entirely. I just pity them, the king has detected their life to be this way.”

“And you will be better when you become king. I’m sure.”

Azuka looked almost startled, as if I had taken him with my words. But what did I know about ridged responsibility, survival was only ever on my mind. He cleared his throat. “We should go on. Up the stairs I mean.”

Remotely, both of us inclined our heads to the book. “Any plans.”

“Except to be ready for anything,” he said. “And nothing else.”

“That’s unlike you? I could have sworn you’d come up with some genius plan to make this easier.

I gripped the sword tighter in my hands, ready to climb. We rounded the flubber pool, to the large sets of stairs carpeted by neutral colors. The lower stairs was a warren of spiral patterns, gravely dug in deeply to ensure its inability to close up through years- moldy stacks of insect homes padded the corners, the wood used produced ticks of children about. Some of the staircases were missing too, but it was not enough to put a halt on our ascending.

The placed screeched with years, ancient years but it hadn’t been long since it was last inhabited. If I was right that’d be seventeen, eighteen years ago, or less? Dust emanated quickly from the center steps, stuffing my noise with its unfavorable smell causing me to sneeze.

“Can you be any more louder?” Azuka whispered. “Wouldn’t want to alert any attention.”

“Not if they know already. Said so yourself.”

“I know what I said.”

“Very well.”

There was a large ground waiting for us to arrive, and luckily void of threats. It was a far cry from the steps, there were no splintered wood, not insect houses. It was also rid of dust which I was grateful for. It was as if someone cleaned them. The book was just there, I wondered what would happen if I made a grab of it.

Something cold registered through the shirt I wore; it was so cold I almost felt it in my spines. Azuka came beside me, attention to the book we had to take. A small indentation was under his eye when I sneaked a glance, perhaps a recent injury, for I hadn’t noticed it outside. I wondered how he’d gotten it.

“You should go grab it,” he said pushing me forward.

I started ahead but later turned when I hadn’t heard following steps. “Are you not coming?”

He shook his head. “I’ll keep watch in case of anything.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

An archway gave light from above and I barely crossed the embodiment of what I now realized was salt, before a scream reached my ears and a very audible call of my name. I whirled.

I stumbled further in, gripping the edges of the desk which hoisting the book up, to balance myself. Azuka was below the stairs, at the very entrance; by the stems with an unconscious Zina limp in his arms. It shouldn’t have worried me really, but the Azuka who had escorted me stood frozen on the flat board with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

Reflexively I ran forward, to the right one. How I knew, surpasses me. Spider webs drifted across my way out, covering up like ancient walls built with unbreakable materials. The fake Azuka had somehow gotten down the stairs, now standing at the center of the room, his arms by his sides.

“Let me out!” I said breathlessly, trying to clobber my way out while peeking at the events down below.

Gently, the real Azuka let down Zina, stepping forward to match the other one neck to neck. “Who are you?” the real one asked.

“That’s the thing,” the fake one said. “No one knows. I may be this,” – he pointed to himself. “Or that,” – he pointed to Zina. “I can be all of you-“

The real Azuka’s reflexes were quick, but not quick enough to land a blow. His blade glazed passed his head with just a step from the other, then the fake one landed a fist on his back

knocking him over. The fake one knocked him forward and he fell heavily to the floor. The fake one was tough.

“Azuka,” I called out. As I tried to use my leg instead I was shoved back.

“Aruna must keep you here.” The oroma’s face came to focus. I raised my head slowly. Dread cuddling in the depth of my stomach. And they weren’t on my face but rather on the nasty hairstyle on my head. I saw a longing look on her face.

“Let her go,” the real Azuka bellowed.

“For someone not like us. You seem rather authoritative.” The real Azuka raised his sword above his head wanting to strike but the other knocked his hands away without moving a muscle. “She should have known right. That I was not the real one.” He directed his next question to me with a glance. “What did you see? I know you saw something.”

That mark under his eyes. It should have told me when I saw it, there should have been some doubt but I hadn’t known him since birth. The other was staring beamishly at my expense. There was a look of fear in Azuka’s eyes now as he was forcefully wrenched downwards on one knee. There were babies surrounding us now, row after row they clawed their nails in the air, wanting to advance with intensity.

The other was still grinning. “Are you afraid?” he asked Azuka who was quite shaken up, his gaze never breaking away. “You shouldn’t be,” – he wrenched himself closer to speak to his ears but it was loud enough from where I was. “You’ve already seen it before.”

Azuka said nothing. His chest rose and fell in short quick pants and I would almost feel the strength of his desire to cower away; to forget everything was ever happening. “Azuka,” I called out. “Do something.” When he didn’t answer, I grew panicked.

“He’s not here any longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s back at the same spot, the day I swept clean of any.”

My eyes widened. “You are...”

“I prefer to be called King.”

I could see them, those wrenched eyes I doubtly possessed, filling his once white eyes, twinkling with inches of dark and light shades of purple lilies. My lips had become so dry, I had to run my tongue against them to keep them moving.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aruna scurried to the side, retched gazes never leaving the nasty style on my head. Fanan walked in, the webs parting ways in more than a single area. His steps away from the still static Azuka was fluid, almost eccentric, his mouth turned up in a sickening grin.

“STAY AWAY FROM ME!” I screamed swiping my blades in front of me to keep him from advancing further. I could feel the blood rising from my neck to my brain, a mixture of fear and anger. Well more of fear I suppose because my hands were fidgeting uncontrollably, seconds away from releasing my weapon. He stared at it with boredom, and advanced without hesitation. I stepped backwards, more than I liked but needed, for my behind was caught in the thick web which were growing thicker, so thick I could see nothing out when I turned.

Fanan tapped the table for attention. “There is nothing to be afraid of child.”

“I beg to... to differ,” I said stuttering.

His shoulders sagged, making him look almost sad? “You must know we are one. From the same Chi I used to create this.” – He spread his arms wide. “All of this.” He placed his hands softly on mine, slowly wrenched the weapon away and handed it to Aruna. “You need not be afraid.”

No need to sugar coat how I truly felt with Hanye’s kidnapper breathin down my neck with funny words I couldn’t comprehend. I was thoroughly spooked. I was sure he had that effect during his days as king. His features-now I knew his true identity- was far from Azukas, with his pale adolescent eyes, skin, wreched bony hands white as snow, closer, trinckets of burns crested gallantly on his knuckles. I wondered briefly, what his stands was, what he truly looked at without his mask of skin.

Despite his skinny demeanor, I knew with a hand around my neck, he would snap it in seconds without a second thought and leave as if he hadn’t done anything. I haven’t known him for long, but I knew faintly what he was capable of. He was beginning to run a finger along my chin, slowly, he descendended messuring me up like some prize to be won.

“What is it you want?”

“Straight to the point, I see.” He stepped back, running the tip of his tongue across his fingers. “You want the book I suppose?”

“Not if I have my friend.”

“So you are not engaged with the prince’s affairs of ridding Heads of me?” It’s been long since I’ve thought of that. If Hanye were to be given to me right now, I knew we’d be halfway across the country. Fanan’s sideways smirk knew the intensity or rather the strain his question

has indented into my brain. "I will give you the book, don't get me wrong. But you will have to make up your mind."

"And what do I have to make up my mind on?"

"To join us or to continue a winless battle with the prince," he said, then added as my lips opened to protest. "Ah. I've said too much."

"What if I say no?" I asked knowing what his answer would be.

"Then your friend will be no more?"

I studied him. He snatched a bug from the air, placed it and chewed. It seemed there was more to it than he asked, and I dare say I was too frightened to suggest. "You are gathering your own army...."

"Yes. I need my people. Powerful people," he said. "But they can never measure up to you. You are greater than anyone could imagine."

"That's why you wanted me hear. I cajole me into you stupid plans." He nodded. It made sense now. Why the Oroma didn't kill me. Then a sudden realization came over me. "You wanted me to come."

"Actually yes. I always hated the use of force..."

"Liar," I spat.

"Maybe," he said and shrugged. "I wanted you to come to me willingly. To see a child of the dark chi grow up into this fine, strong. It is beyond me."

I wiped the sweat dripping from my cheeks. "How would you know," I said. "I haven't broken the spell."

"That wrenched Mami Wata. Tough luck getting that one," he said sounding remorseful. "But we did thanks to Aruna." Aruna gave a short bow, then stretched out a piece of neckbead which so much resembled the one I played with around the woman's neck.

I gasped. "You killed her!"

"One must do what he must to get what he wants," he said. "Even if it means going to the extreme."

"You are sick." I could feel the hot, sharp tears wanting to spill an ocean full. "What are you yet to take away?"

"Hmm." He paraded the space with hands tucked in behind him. "I seem to think of any other thing to take away."

"Give my back my friend right now."

He chuckled. “Funny how you think it’d be that easy. Telling me in plain would to hand over something...”

“She’d not a something.”

“Right. What I mean is that, your dear friend is my bargaining chip for now. So weigh your options before you choose.”

“You am not giving any.”

He rubbed his eyes. “I am as a matter of fact,” he said. “The options are enormous but I’m being lenient by limiting it to two. You either go with the prince’s way or you choose my way.”

“I know the former will never be to your liking.”

He sneezed a giggle. “This is why I like you,” he beckoned to me even though his was thoroughly looking the other way. “We are beginning to understand each other.”

“Answer my question.”

Fanan turned back to me. Any signs of laughter were gone now. I could only stand there under his scrutiny, aghast. It was frightening, his stare I mean; hollow and free of life. “I urge you to choose wisely.”

I took a deep breath. “And what would happen if go the other way,” I started.

He snapped his finger like he’d hit a brilliant idea. “I’ll show you something.”

“What?”

“You ask too many questions.” Fanan stretched out his hands and I looked at it in distaste. It was beyond me if he believed I would willingly grab it. There were two reasons why I stayed; because of Hanye and because I was locked in against my wish. His fingers wiggled upwards, his middle finger moving more than the others and when he realized my utmost stubbornness, he gave up. “Very well.”

He jabbed the table, putting a dent on the intricate edges. “What...” I was thoroughly interrupted by the heavy blowing within the dent. The pages of the book reacted as well, turning in variant speed to quick for me to see clearly the pages. Somehow the dent was spreading wider than I expected, a black hole emanated in its depths and I knew it wasn’t ordinary when my body fell in.

I felt my feet hit solid ground, and stood, shakingly as the hazy world cleared up into focus.



I knew immediately where I was. The stairs launching into a circular room, brave vases of bronze beside the silver glazed threshold was a section the Heads palace I was yet to see. I straightened hurriedly, scaling the oak staircase slowly.

I could hear voices coming from the top of the stairs. A frail looking man, abundant woolen dreads which was barely covered by the crown on his head was walking down the stairs with another man in a soft regalia. Both modeled their markings in the most beautiful way, the king especially looking fine and exquisite with his akwete.

“Their want it your highness,” the other said. “It is the customary tradition of the people when these things don’t happen in time.”

The king’s gaze was boring a hole in nothingness. Even the brightness of the room could not soften his expression. When they passed me, I bowed in the way I should when kings walked passed but he ignored me.

“They should know the gods have a hands in such matters,” the king said shakily. “If they want someone to blame it should me for not fulfilling...”

“It is not what we believe.”

“It is what it is Chief Ike. She is the rightful heir.”

“Not when she makes a man king,” Ike said. “They must been appeased.”

“I am the king of Ebos,” he half-shouted. The chief barely batted an eye to the resonating sound of the king’s tone but I wouldn’t say I was not forced to reach even though I wasn’t on the receiving end.

“We are worried about you my king,” said Ike.

“If anyone cared, such request would never be made,” the king said curiously.

“Such requests are made because we care for you and our kingdom,” he said. With a short bow, he said. “We await your decision under the next full moon. I’ll go now.”

The Chief walked passed me without sparing a glance. The king balled a fist, with a sigh, he went the other way. I followed him.

The king went through an open door, emerging next to a twin pillar in a corridor. There were other twin pillars with at least a meter gap spanning though the long corridor, the moon stood up giving light to the cemented pavement. The king stopped beside a door. I could tell by the biting of his lips, he was chewing upon something beyond his power.

Then as though he’d made a decision, he knocked gently on the door. “My queen? Are you awake?”

Instead of a reply, something crashed upon another inside and it sounded expensive. The king ventured inside, and I glided noiselessly behind him into a bed chamber. In the darkness, a figure sat hunched on a bed, its chest heaved and markings glittering like light.

The king sighed and clicked a match on, lit the candle stick throwing the room into a beautiful swirl of wonder. An antique hand painted bed of wildlife outshone the bear skins curtains, and the pots of baby palms breasted the sheets in string shadows. The Queen was glowing in the light, but her expression posed otherwise; puffy eyes, lines of stress and wrenched eye bags.

“My queen...”

“My king. Where have you been?” The king sighed. Yet again, he was torn internally, simply avoiding her gaze. It was enough for the queen to know without words. “I understand.” She got up and pulled a cloth thick with varieties of wrappers.

He pulled her up and away from her activities. “No. This cannot be the only way.”

“It is the only way.” This time her eyes were leaking and her voice strained. “It is what they want.”

“That’s not what I want for you. From us. If there is anyone who should leave,” he said. “It should be me. But...”

“Because I’m a woman.” I felt a lump in my throat at her uncharacteristic statement. “As a woman I cannot let you to shame and as a woman I cannot let that happen to someone I love.”

“Neither can I my queen.”

“You have to let me go,” she said. “There are fine ladies in the kingdom who can bare you a son to take the throne. Someone stronger, fairest and not me.”

“It is you I want my queen.”

“We cannot always get what we want.” The king frowned when she stepped away. Cleaning her cheeks of tears, she bent low to continue folding her wrappers. He watched her static. I felt as if they were there for at least an hour. And just when I started questioning my reason for my being in such a tense presence, the king pulled out a book under his sleeve, placed it on the bed.

The queen was yet to notice as her head was still dug deep into her packing. “When your father, the late king gave me your hand I marriage, I promised to keep the smile on your face till when reached the netherworlds.”

Then she looked up, obvious curiosity settled on her features on catching the new object. “What is that?”

“I made that promise to him and to myself,” he said. “To hold and to keep with me forever even though I have to go through extreme measure. I made that.”

The queen frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I met an ezemor. His name is Okirikiri...”

“My king what did you do?” said the queen sharply.

“Sacrifices need to be made,” he returned in the same tone. “I just need to find the right one to get you,” –he bent low beside her and placed his hands on her flat stomach. “To get us. This kingdom a child.”

The queen pushed away from him. “You’ve gone mad my king.”

“It is not madness when you are concerned.”

“Well it is.” The queen stretched into the shadowy folds of her covers to pick the book. “Something so dangerous should not be used carelessly. Especially the craft is banned by our ancestors.”

“Maybe they didn’t know what good it may do.”

“Look,” she showed him the upper side of her arm. It was glazed with a buldin pulp of grey. I recoiled on sight for it seemed it was ready to pulp. “You remember. Father succeeded neither with the idea of duplication.”

“At least they had one of you and your mother died of natural causes.”

“I cannot let you do this my king,” the queen sobbed, forcing the book in his grip. “Take it. Take it back to where it came from.”

“Queen...”

“My king please,” she roared, her voice bouncing off the walls. “I beg of you not to do as you want to. On my behalf, on the kingdoms behalf. On your children’s children’s...”

“It used to be our children,” he said at once. “We had dreams.”

“Not anymore,” she said. “I urge you to move on.”

The king gave her a penetrating gaze and she equally returned it not relenting from her decision. “Then I should come with you.”

She shook her head. “Then the throne goes to his hands,” she said. “As much as Ike leads a good chieftaincy, father entrusted the throne in your care.”

“Queen, please.” His voice broke, sounding vulnerable, the kind that wrenched the soul.

“Good night my king,” said the queen quickly, turning away. This time she felt her way across the room, to the window. Her fingers curled around the drapes, throwing them aside to expose the glittering moon.

The king finally receded in disappointment and strode away. I followed him.

Outside, he slouched in movement down the corridor further away from the queen’s chambers. Then he stopped at the end of an edge and so did I. I noticed his grip tightening as he pressed the book closer to his chest, his head tucked into his chest and I knew he was torn again between two sides. But this time, the consequences were going to be life changing.

Finally, he straightened his stance as if he had made up his mind and hurried off. I quickened my steps too, no longer scared I was going to be seen. It was obvious everyone was rather oblivious to my being, the bedchamber was proof enough. All the way to the gates (it was the exact pathway as I was used to), there were no souls around, perhaps asleep as the king should have been.

I should have been walking behind him, but a flash of light hit me at once to a different place. I knew the place too, it was the dark village, just this time it looked different. Better different. The huts were erect with people moving in and out and about, the flubber pool was replaced with high flowing water from above.

“What did she say?” a voice said. “Did she agree?”

I gaped at the man bearing striking resemblance to Okirikiri standing next to the king by the fall. The king did mention the name earlier and now I remembered seeing it during my inner probing.

“No. She doesn’t like it,” the king said, running his fingers over his head.

“Then, all is in vein.”

“Not exactly,” the king said. “I plan to go on.”

“Very well,” he said. “The experiments.” —experiments? “Are coming out better than I expected but of course lives were lost.”

The king lost his balance, jabbing Okirikiri’s shoulders. “You said it would be safe,” he said. “You promise this will not put my people in harm’s way.”

Unflinching Okirikiri said. “They are willing to do so much as your people...”

“We are my king. As long as we keep the queen,” a large man came up to them. From behind I could hear giggles from a group of children running to the man. He picked one up, cradling him on his chest.

“These people are giving all they have for you. Let them.”

The scene whirled again, the darkness engulfed me and I felt myself falling as images flashed before me. The queen was before the king in tears, ripples of veins manned his head as he ordered for her to be taken away. The king was burning in another, the flames engulfed him as the queen shut the door to his chambers. She wasn't happy about it by the string of fresh tears on her face after she collapsed in the hands of another. It was a man, his face was tucked in the queen's shaking shoulders.

"No!" I felt myself yelling.

My body was falling quite faster now, and the images began nothing but a blur. With a crash I crashed on the indented table, the book lying flat on my stomach.

Before I had time to regain my breath, Chibuzor came into view sweating. Then my ears became aware of the sound of swords clashing with claws.

I sat up. "It was Fanan's story. I think I know why he wants vengeance."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Going to the palace would be the worse possible mistake anyone could make, especially if they were covered in blood, and limping on your good foot with a very unconscious Zina tied to the back of a horse. And not to forget the dazed prince a good distance ahead, tripping on stones and sticks he could easily avoid. Chibuzor had been silent too. Luckily, he sensed something might amiss so he got on his horse to the dark village. How? He maneuvered the question, claiming it was his duty as the prince's personal guard to protect him. When I probed further, he fixed me with a solid glare putting my questions on hold. "I answer already. Ask no more."

"Fine. I won't ask," I said raising my hands in surrender.

"Good," he replied with a straight face. "We camp to get self's back."

"What about the king? He will know when his son doesn't come back."

"Why Kamfeechi stay," he said. "His king left hand." That explained why he I rarely saw him as I did the others. "I hope it was worth the effort," Chibuzor said with grim fury. "To put neck on lines of death. I really hope it worth it."

Chibuzor tended to Zina's injuries with liquids he grinded and squeezed from wild plants. I assisted in the best possible way, gathering sticks to weige my bad foot and her broken ones. It was quite difficult to set her knee straights, it took careful moving in order to get it right and a bit of a crunch. Carefully, I tied the sticks with ropes-too big but would do, to keep them in place, moved her to lay on her back for a comfortable relaxation.

Azuka sitting away from us and looking thunderstruck scowled at the ground. Every now and then, I found myself looking at him. I wondered if he was okay.

"Stop staring," Chibuzor said.

I turned away. "I'm worried about him. He's been like that for hours now," I said. "Like an object." A grunt escaped my lips as he applied pressure to my foot.

"Give time. It becomes better."

"Does it?" I asked.

"No. Usually it take days to speak a word to any of us when he like that. Last time, the king had to knock his door every noon."

"I thought they didn't have a good relationship."

"They don't. More like the princes frowns on kings rule, but by some actions he cares for his sons like he should." He squinted at me. "Do you know what happened to him in there? His freeze state never happens unless it has to do with Fanan. Tell me."

Zina coughed loudly interrupting our conversation and I was glad she did. I was not ready for Chibuzor to be the first one to learn what happened between Fanan and I. Zina's eyes were tightly closed and face scrunched in pain, still in a fit of cough.

"I'll get more water plants," he said, giving my foot a final massage. "Let's hope it'd be a good substitute for water." He walked away.

Shifting in position, I touched my foot in bemusement. The pain was reduced to nothing, and I knew my blood was partly the reason I felt nothing. It was something I was going to have to get used to.

"Kamsie!"

I turned around in surprise. Zina was pushing herself up against the tree with her back, her legs limp in front of her. She stared in the same way I did. "You're awake."

"Have been for a while now." Her pale skin was brighter now, life dotted her cheeks although not thoroughly and I'd have the cold to blame for that.

"You should have said something."

"And have Chibuzor fuss over me," she said irritated. "No thank you."

"You did that on purpose didn't you?" I asked.

"I know when someone's poking a little too much," she said and I was forced to glance away in embracement. "Tell me, do you plan on staying with us?"

My head whipped so fast I could have left myself headless. "I... I mean... he, how did you."

"The man doesn't know how to shut up. So?" there was a twinge of desperation settled in her tone.

I picked my finger still finding it difficult to wrap my head around what had happened and it shouldn't be. "I've never had to make such difficult decisions in my life. Not ever," I said. "What would you do if you were me?"

"Hmmm. I'll weigh," she said.

"Weigh?"

She nodded. "One has to be more dangerous than the other," she explained. "The prince will not think twice before placing his people first."

"You don't understand. It's not the same thing. I have a friend held captive by the people she hates the most all because of me."

“Actually it is. Would you rather gain and loose more? Think about it for a moment. See if what you’re gaining outweighs the losses.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Selfishness and greed has been the order of Ebos as long as I’ve know,” she said, shifting painfully. “It can be changed and finally something good can happen.”

I recoiled and curled up into a ball, my arms wrapped around my bent knees tightly it would have shattered if they’d been fragile. Siding with the prince would be the way anyone would expect me to go but it was not a guarantee I would get Hanye back. Fanan’s way leads to the direct rescue of my friend but I would have to partake in his plans of merging the kingdoms. Wouldn’t it be better for us, not to live as a divided nation? “Fanan moved to the dark chi because of his queen,” I blurted.

“Yes.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “I thought it did but you said selfishness has been the order. Fanan was not selfish but in love. He went through so much to get a child to succeed his throne.”

“You don’t understand or you don’t want to understand,” Zina said. “The Queens heart was for another. He got furious, did things with the dark chi and eventually got what he deserved.”

“We both know he didn’t truly deserved it.”

She hesitated. “Life is cruel Kamsie. It’s been to to all of us,” she said. “The prince wants to fix what he has, we have, by ridding the world of Fanan. He’s been infused with the dark chi already. Nothing good will ever come out of him.” I saw it in her eyes, the silent begging for me to choose their side of the fight.

I rubbed my sore arms already reacting to the cold, as Chibuzor glazed our presence with his foot scrunching dry leaves.

#

I should have joined the others upfront but despite the need to get to the palace before sunset, I could not force myself to move quicker. My thoughts were stuck in a pile of mud and eventually my head started to hurt. So, I sang the usual song in a low hum and was catapulted back to Tails. It was when I thought the name our town was coined from the rattle snake. It was one sunny afternoon where we learnt from the warden under the shades of a palm tree, writing down a number to objects we could see in our foresights. Like the other children, I searched around for whatever I could find. Nested in the depth of the kennel fruit, a long rope (as I called it then) found its way above the warden’s head. We laughed at it and at the way the warden had jumped out of the way when she had caught sight of it.



Azuka wouldn't be please it was killed after. But what choice did we have, it attacked us with venomous hisses. Hanye held me thereafter, alongside an explanation of what the rope truly was. It hurt knowing such moments were out of reach. Hanye was all my life, how would she reacted mine was a lie? I was not like her anymore.

It was scary how my train of thought ventured to such area. I should just focus on getting her back first before any other. I spent the entire journey either watching or sidestepping pebbles, but I very well stayed behind. And no one seemed to have no problem with that. Everything Zina had told me kept coming back, in fact it left me confused than I already was. The prince and his plans- I understood it. The horse heaved, a signal we had gotten to the palace.

"I'll take her to her room," Chibuzor said, taking Zina down from the horse. He helped her away to the prince's palace but it seemed she didn't require much assistance. Zina's steady movement was proof she was not only human but one of the dark side.

Azuka pulled the book from the saddle, tucked it under arm and headed towards the carpenters shed.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

There was no response. He had gone on for a while before I concluded I was not going get anything from him. I sighed, padding across to him quite quickly to walk beside him. I gripped my elbows, not because the air was chilly – the sun was up and burning. It was the vibe Azuka passed on from himself, something mixed with a sense of emptiness.

We moved quietly through to a high and abandoned project, dust emanated from the ground like cows grazed with their hoofs. Weeds grew in the half windows, carpet grass replaced stone hedges and pieces of broken shovels laid wasted near the building. This was my first time seeing a forgotten home, but I knew it was going to be loved by the crested heart, even the weeds couldn't cover.

I was careful to latch onto the rope as Azuka pulled with strength on his side, bringing us up to the top of the building. The last thing I wanted to do was to stay on, so I stretched a foot at a time out. I could hear the click of my slippers against the floors-heel, toe, heel, toe, the sun heating on my head despite the thickness of my hair.

One of my eyebrows rose up in question. Azuka was staring out in space few inches away, eyes closed and body looking grey in the sun. I was fairly certain the place had some sought of significance to him.

I moved towards him and stood. Glancing at him, he sucked in a deep breath.

"I always come here when I see those eyes," he said. "The heat of the sun helps me get better."

I curled my arms around me and imitated his actions. “It really is refreshing once you get past the burn.”

For the first time, he drew a smile. Setting a knee down, he went down to sit on the edge. He curled into a ball, his arms wrapping around his bent legs so tightly, I couldn’t tell if it would be okay to do the same, if he would like it if I did. I’d never seen him so shattered like he’d break into a million pieces but I did seem like he was close to reverting to his old self – a little. Eventually I sat down, keeping a good distance away.

“My brother and I used to come out here when I was little. It was his building,” he said. “Had plans to gift it to me once its completed but he died.”

“I’m sorry,” I sympathized.

“Father thought it was a waste of time and funds. But brother was stubborn like our mother.” It occurred to me, he was trying to shield his face away from me, by keeping his knees up. It broke me seeing him so vulnerable for the first time. I moved closer and took one of his hands in mine, and he didn’t pull away. His hands were cold, his fingers trembling. “She thought it was a great idea. Having a palace of my own when I grew.”

“I’m sure it would have been wonderful.”

“It would have been. Kosi said it would be and I knew it would be as long as he pronounced it.”

“You mentioned you killed him.” I know I shouldn’t have said what I said, but I couldn’t help my curiosity. Well, maybe I should have put it in a different way which didn’t sound so harsh.

There was silence next. The tiny muscles around his eyes twitched, quivered for a minutes before he reached his free hand to clean his fallen tears off. He was trying to become strong, I’m sure it dampened his pride to break in front of a woman. I had little experience in providing comfort for a second party, it was Hanye who was good at those.

After several moments of staring into space he said, “I pushed him. Right here on this top.”

I shook my head. “That can’t be possible.”

Pulling away, he drew the same heart shape on the ground. “I remember we did draw a crossed shaped heart on that day. A smaller one that is. He joked about us dying if we touched the bigger one. Funny how it really happened.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means what hearts mean. Love. Family. As brothers we would always be together.” – he drew a line in the middle. “Separated we are no longer one. It was his saying.”

“You really loved him.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if keeping his eyes open would do him no good.  
“Tell me about something.”

I would have called out on his avoidance of my query but his eyes were desperate waiting for me to change the subject. “Like what?”

“Anything at all,” he said seeming rather pleased I was going along his wanting for diversion.

“I used to think our name came from snakes.”

“Tails?”

I nodded and he laughed. I felt something warm and powerful inside my chest as he laughed; relief he was reverting quicker than Chibuzor advised or I was the author of his change.  
“It’s not funny,” I grumbled.

“What made you think that?”

“You should know that descriptions mislead young children,” I defended. “All I asked was what it was.”

“I’m sure it crawled up your bed.”

“Hung above our warden’s head actually,” I said trying to contain a laugh. “You should have seen the look on her face when it fell. Scared her and me for life.”

“Why should you be scarred?”

“The children laughed at me for my mistake.”

“You told them out loud!” he exclaimed and steeled his chin to keep his laugh at bay.

I glanced away in embarrassment. “I told you I was little.”

“Kosi would have forced you into learning to love snakes,” he said slowly.

“He owned snakes?” I asked turning to look at him.

“Harnessed them. I believed he was able to speak to them.”

“That’s fun,” I said, my tone implying otherwise. “They must have said nice things.”

He smiled. “It was a sin to harm the snakes in any way. That was one tradition father wanted maintained in heads. I learnt to love them too.”

“When did he die?”

“Five years ago. I remember the day to be windy and the sun lost in the thick dark cloud. We came out that day because I wanted to see my palace.”

“That’s why you believed you killed him,” I murmured.

He turned sharply to look at me. “I killed him. If only I had stayed in, Kosi would have been here with me.” I didn’t have to voice my next question, I believed it was in my eyes. “In the clouds I saw those eyes. Those haunting eyes I can never bring myself to forget. I don’t remember walking to the edge, but he said I did right before he fell to his death.”

My throat began to feel very tight. I didn’t know what to say in times like this. This was the very reason the servants were always on edge about the subject. Now I understood, I would have acted like them too if a stranger were to ask something so deep. There were some wounds that never healed, not even in many years.

“He- And he was to be announced crowned prince of Heads the next day,” he added softly.

“I’m sure it was a difficult time.”

He let out a long exhale. “It was. It always it. We just wear a mask to forget it ever existed but the trust is that it never goes away.”

For the first time, I wondered what it would be like to have watched your only sibling fall to his death and lived with the blame to death. Even though no one openly slandered him to his face, he suffered in torment. My heart would not have been able to survive, I might gone crazy or worse done something terrible to myself. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t expect you to say anything,” he said. “Just help me fulfill my brother’s wishes,” he finished with a whisper.

I considered his words for some time. His voice held a hoarse urgency that told me there was something critical in my reply. Why did life have to throw me in such difficult situation?

“I thought they were your wishes,” I said finally.

“They are but Kosi thought them first,” he added. “It was his plan to finish off Fanan to protect his kingdom before dealing with father’s rule. Father isn’t that bad honestly, he’s just...”

“Something.”

“Something indeed.”

“Are you sure that is really what you want?”

“It’s what I’ve lived for all my life,” he said quietly.

I nodded soberly, somehow knowing I have successfully seen everything about this boy. We sat in a comfortable silence, staring at the clouds thickening with moisture, watching a drip disfigure the drawn heart. “Everything should eventually work out fine in the end,” I heard myself saying. “I’m going to find Hanye...”

“And lots more.” He stared and I stared back. Somehow, my body was drifting closer, closing up the distance between us. I wouldn’t say I blamed the sudden change in weather, and dare I say it was a spur of the moment because it wasn’t, because when our lips touched I knew I wanted it.

## (ZINA CAME IN)

### CHAPTER TWENTY

It’s bit past bed hours, and the weather remained in its contradictory state for as long as we were up diving our thoughts between who spoke the right predictions. I insisted while counting the number of times the soundless lighting struck that the rain was indeed not going to fall while Azuka held strongly on the fact that it would. And now we waited making hints whatever came to our minds pointedly avoiding a talk about the incident. I felt guilty somehow because of the thoughts about Zina and annoyed he’d have to choose a queen in a few days. This must been the wrenching feeling Zina always felt when such topic came to ears, gut tearing and head turning and an urge to throw up.

“The night possess its own type of beauty,” he said turning slowly with a smile. “So dangerous yet so intoxicating.”

“Do you think stones feel?” I asked. “Like when there’s a heavy downpour from the sky. They should feel something at least.”

“Of course they could but their meant to be still and mouthless,” he said. “So we’ll never know.”

“Maybe someone amongst you can talk to them?”

“Trees I’ve heard but never stones or pebble or anything that’s meant to be still.”

“You said it yourself,” I said affably. “The townspeople don’t know you.”

“True and they would eventually,” he said.

“On your birthday?”

“On my birthday. I wish everyone to be there,” he said. I want them to know I will never be like my father.”

“And I’m certain you will not.”

“Hmm.”

“The children used to set up this whole thing with the instrumenst to celebrate birthdays for the orphans.” I laughed as my thoughts glazed through the moments of children laughing. “I came up with it. An idea though but Hanye pushed it though.”

“You two were really close.”

“Sisters. She was more of a pusher. The type who riles your blood to do a task.”

“Kosi was kind of...err wanter.”

“Wanter?”

“Yeah.”

“For a prince, you have a wonderful vocabulary of titles.” I laughed.

“He wanted a lot of things. Dreams actually. Things he wanted to fulfill once he became king. And no one questioned him of course but I believe father always gave him the bad eye. Too bad he can never seen the end of it...” he shrugged. “At first I took it as a punishment.”

“And now?”

“Duty.”

I tried to picture him differently from his father, addressing his subjects and them in turn chanting his name for changing Heads. Surely, this would be new to him but I bet he’d be able to manage. “What about the killings?”

“Good water must flow in my nation,” he said. “It should go back to the way it was. I read that...”

“You read?”

“No,” he said and now he spoke slowly. “How could I when I have children to feed...”

“You don’t have children...”

“But I will someday,” he said. “Its required of me. To bear an heir to the throne.”

I stared at him. “So you don’t read?”

The stones were cold under my palms and just a little bit damp beneath my bottom, probably moist from sitting in a place for more than a few hours. And yet my eyes weren't droopy, and sleep was far away from reach. My head was resting on his shoulders and his on my head and I was comfortable that way and I was sure he was too because he neither tried to pull away ever since.

"I was kidding," he said. "I think. I indulge in sword fights more than I do books."

"What about Zina?"

He met my look steadily. "What about Zina?" he said. "The tress live to provide us with fruits and oil so as the grasses are food for the cows. I'm trying to tell you that everything serves their purpose."

I dropped my gaze. Now an unsettling image of an unwanted separation formed in my head. I thought of a grand wedding after his birthday.

"Let's stick to the plan," Azuka said, as if guessing my thoughts, though I knew it was a faraway dream. "It was one of Kosi's catch phrase. Stick to the plan always, and never default." His eyes went watery. "Look forward and never back. I admired him."

"You're lucky," I said. "I've never had to hear phrases like that. We were all trying to survive in Tail. It's either you're reading or out stealing."

"But you celebrated birthdays."

"Rarely, and in secret. The warden would have killed us if she ever heard we did something like that. Always the sadist," I added ruefully.

"Why?"

"I ruined her dog."

"How so?"

I nibbled on my bottom lip. "Hot food. It was a mistake I swear."

I felt his shoulders shake, and heard snippets of laughter above. "How could you."

I shook my head. "How couldn't I?" my voice was bitter. "The dog came out of nowhere. I'm easily shaken up."

"I see..." A long chattering noise, sounded from somewhere interrupting me. It sounded like somebody was beating against a board – a loud one that is, or drums I realized with the uniqueness of the sound.

"The night owl," he said, huddling himself up with a hand on my wrist. His fingers were slightly cold and stiff. "He keeps watch of the dazzlers."

“The dazzlers,” I inquired. “How come I haven’t heard this?”

He shrugged. “You must sleep like a dead cat.”

“What...”

“Shuu,” he said. “Now watch.”

His gaze was fixed on the sky, the same one we had been watching for hours. I inched an eyebrow, then tried to see what he was trying to look at. Another lightening cracked up, this time, there was a thundering sound splitting my ear drums in half.

The sky remained still and motionless for some time before everything around me came to life. It started when a star began to tremble and shudder. The star slanted, and then it fell, leaving a line of dust in its wake. Suddenly, the other stars went along beginning with the same tremble, swerving with intent and with raw speed they formed mini circles of twos. Their shine brightened, showering us with enough light, and dusted us with a pale shimmer of silvery dust.

“Wow,” I said, watching the amazing scene before me. “Is someone doing this?”

“I see it as a sign of the gods watching over us,” he said. “Although it happens once a year, I try my best to watch it even from below.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“That’s what I said the first time mother show me. I feel it’s a sign all will be well in due time.”

“Where you close to her too?”

“We were like any other mother and child. She was simple and loved the stars. She loved us.”

“Your father?”

“He has his moments,” he said. “I guess we should get started on this.” He dug under his shirt and brought out something, which he handed over to me. It was the first time I held the book in my hands; it bore uneven pages, laced with thread and fastened with a skinny string.

“I forgot about this,” I said, untying the bow string. Then hesitated as my fingers touched the lapel. “You told me you read.”

“I didn’t know a song book existed. So I don’t know what’s in it. And now it’s been tampered. It can be dangerous. ”

“Oh.” My fingers closed around it tightly as if I was bold enough. I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was no use going through so much just to chicken out at last. I pried it open imprudently, and was met with a blank page, slinging again to the next.



“I thought you’d be careful.”

I shrugged. “Well, I tend to just go with things,” I said as we drifted toward the floor, glimmering under the starlight.

#

The book was proving far more difficult than I anticipated. Azuka was already tapping, soothing I realized he did when he was annoyed. It seemed it was blatantly trying to keep us away from learning. Few minutes ago, we came across a song- the only song in the book which had been a step up. But the problem was that, the wordings were damaged. An annoying whisk of blur and ink stained wordings. At first I thought my vision was reduced to nothing in the blinding lights, but when Azuka complained the name, I realized the book was the problem.

We copied the wordings we could see on the ground with pebbles and hard mud. It was Azuka’s idea of being able to start from somewhere. The writing was something I’d seen before, yet felt so familiar, perhaps I may have come across it in the record room. The crosses were deeper than I’d known, the vertical lines bore more horizontal lines and some a mixture of symbolic letters.

Now we were done, I stared at the ones we wrote and then back to the book with obvious defeat. I realized a sigh realizing, a dead end was upon us. Even Azuka’s smart bottom could not solve what was in front of us.

“This is more ancient than the gods,” Azuka said moody with frustration. “Even I wasn’t thought this.”

“Do you think the king would know?”

“And spill our secrets. No thank you.”

“If only we could see every letter, we can start from there,” I said pinching the corner of my eye. “I can’t think of anything that could work.”

The most frequently occurring lines were the horizontals, appearing in almost each of the other letters. If there turned, they would eventually be verticals matching the others. Together, I presumed though pieces of jargons may be a source. A thought struck me. I drew a curve joining the letters, seeming like a sloppy bridge of death, and slanting the lines over the seven we had written.

At last, I had gotten it. It sounded softly like the distant cricking of a midnight cricket, then like the falling start, the book trembled and with a yelp, I threw it down.

He pointed. “What did you do?” Azuka asked wide eyed.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I only joined the letters together.”

Azuka didn't laugh. "If you tell me someone whispered it to you I'll..."

"Nobody whispered it to me. I figured it out on my own."

Now he did look at with confusion. The light leached the color put of his eyes. They were black coated with silver. "Then, you're not as stupid as I thought," he said blankly.

As I answered with a huff, another lightening glazed the sky. The wordings became clearer. Like magic, the letters danced, changing positions in quick swaps, some chose to stick to other pages as they flipped at random, left to right, right to left. This was consistent for a while until the pages were covered with words. I picked it up carefully, flipping in my hands continues sheets of unfamiliar songs. The first one was for good health, taking up most pages, unique wordings that ended with similar letters. It would seem like a good number of Mami Wata were used for their provision of health as the book was made by them. Every page I turned to bore their names.

I felt extreme excitement of success thumping inside me as familiar wordings came to sight. "This is it," I mumbled.

"So the book was protected by some kind of lock," he said peering from my left.

Normally I would have dived into learning the wordings, but my thoughts drifted to the right decisions I had to make. I was being tested and I would not fall for the wrong side. The letters were right, I was certain of it.

Budding the sleep from my eyes, I began learning. Azuka joined too, although by his tripping on his words I was positive he didn't know what he was doing. The words were not arranged to the end, they were cut short after a few words to the bottom, and like that they got to the far bottom and eventually more pages.

Several times, I paused and stared. This happened less and less as I began grasping the intricacies of the song. Eventually, I learned a page without tripping and forgetting on the words. Yes, there were mistakes, some terrible ones but I quickly got a hold of it. Azuka finally gave up, and waved it off as he sat watching me continue. Possibly thinking how I was better than him at something at least.

At some point, I wished I had my ink, pen and leaves but I had to make do with what I had. The pebble scrapped the floor foreshadowing the previous ones. I switched to the other pages and began to read. And when I was done, I believed I was, I could hear blood pumping in my ears. I had it. The song I always wanted finished in my lips, I had it all. This was the first step to finding Hanye, and I had it.

I shifted just enough to view what I'd written, and it was blood curdling. A good amount of space was taken up by scribbles, yet eligible to read.

"Is that it?" I heard him scrambling up to his feet.

I nodded. "I can sing all of it. I'm positive, I said. "What do we do know."

"Sing. Break the bond. It's the only plaintive thing we should do now."

The next words tumbled out of my mouth without any volition on my part. "Do you know what I think?" I asked. "I think," I continued not sure he'd like what I'd say next. "That everything will be better if Ebos were to rise again."

His body jerked even if it were a little and I felt it. He looked baffled. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. Just a thought I think," I said then shook my head finically. "Forget it. Forget I ever said anything."

"Did Fanan say something?"

"No! I thought..."

He smiled unnervingly. "Funny how I thought of the same thing. I mean not like a merge but a way where we could live together. But a merge can be good too."

"Really?"

"Really. It will be a good idea."

"I thought you'd be against the idea," I observed.

"Did you know Fanan's wife was human?" he said. "He became the way he is because of her but of course this is not where I'm getting at. It was before the rotation started. We all lived as one, and being one should be the end result."

I said nothing to this, because I had nothing to say. This would work out fine in the end, deep down I knew it. Finally, I made my choice. It was a further relief to look away from his uncomfortable stare as I turned around. The starlight was dimming now, a sign I had to hurry up.

The familiar song spilled from my lips. And at the end of the last sentence, the shimmering lavender light exploded from my chest, startling me enough that I rammed into Azuka. He swiftly placed me softly to my knees, the stars slowly returned to their position and my chest began to tighten. I remained silent unable to voice the pains of something gripping my heart, it was squeezing without amnesty and abruptly I was hollered two feet in the air. My hand was forced out reaching out to nothing but plain air. Weather from fear or fascination, I wasn't sure, I tightened my fists. My head was the only part of my body I could control that was why the growing marks on my arms were within my peripheral. I flexed my arm, trying to work the prickling sensation crawling under my skin. Azuka watched, his face hidden in the shadow.

A wolf howled nearby and I convinced myself it reached to something else and not the strange change of my skin. There were no signs the markings were accompanied with my chi, and I closed my eyes and concentrated, I saw a faint purple shimmer enveloping the darkness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Today is the day of the red moon or as the bustling the palace would call it, Azuka's birthday. My foot barely reached the ground when the yelling sounded from the court yard. I rise crossing the room to put one of my marked hands against the peep hole on the flap. The servant was on-loading heavy bags from a carriage. He yelled again to the approaching boy who picks up his pace, hands spread out, knees curved and with a grunt he takes one in his hands.

"After today, things will be different," Zina said. "That's if you don't mess it up." Ever since, she'd been a little harsh with her words. Her eyes were in slits, staring me down which made me uncomfortable. She hated me, and she could not forgive me because I knew she liked him first. Despite how much I knew, she wanted to smack me whole like the first day we met, I was an asset.

"She won't. I trust her," Azuka said. Zina's gaze shifted to where he stood beside me, and then to the hand he placed on my neck. "And I hope you don't lose this." Azuka gently raised the necklace around my neck.

"I won't take it off until I hear the signal," I said looking down at the blue ball crested with a golden lock meant to control my powers. If I had known there was such a necklace, Chibuzor's sword would have been saved. But there were things that needn't saving. I glanced at the brooding figure hovering by the peg, arranging the pieces of his broken blade to its head.

"Shall we go over the plan?" Azuka questioned. Just then, there was a knock on the door. Kamfeechi entered in a long head dress looking at our faces like he was seeing them for the first time, rings of gold and silver decorated his wrist, and fingers and a high cap covered his head. "Just in time Kamfeechi. We were about to go over the plan."

"Glad I was able to make it. But bear in mind, the ceremony starts soon." Kamfeechi stared down on my neck, and like Azuka he raised it gently in his palms. "The egress. How..."

Azuka laughed. "It took a lot of convincing from that old man. I could not always fathom why he is reluctant to help me."

I thought Kamfeechi would answer with a smile but he obviously isn't. He seemed rather disturbed about something, but before I asked, he said, "What about her?" He nodded towards the record keeper writing away at her desk. She must have wither heard him or felt the many eyes staring her way because she raised her head just then.

"She's clever," Zina said.

"This is not like the other times. We cannot afford any risks," Kamfeechi said intelligently. "If this fails, we cannot have any other chance my prince."

“I believe there will be no issue. Besides she barely leaves this place,” I said recurring the weeks I spent in the record room and never once did she leave. I wondered recently how she kept her health stable when I’d never seen her eat nor drink.

Azuka patted his shoulder. “No need to be so tense.”

“I can’t help but to worry.”

“If we stick to the plan, there will be nothing to worry about.”

Azuka sat down on the desk and spread open the banana leave cradling drawings and notes he’d done. “We must have it at the back of our line that Fanan will be visiting us today with his army or alone. But cannot be too sure, that’s why I’ll have Chibuzor heading the guards at the gates. He might sneak in with the visitors,” he said pointing down on the plan. Azuka kept true to his words, inviting the townspeople to the palace. The night before, the orator went around announcing to the people about the invite. “I had any other entrances barricaded,” he shifted his fingers to the deeply ink mark areas- there were three in total and one of them was te short cut the maiden showed us. “He will have no choice than to go through the main gates or above.”

“What about below?” I asked.

“Zina?” Azuka asked.

“The snakes now fill the grounds like you ordered. Though it was difficult to get them out of the walls,” she said scrunching her face like she was relieving a bad memory. “It took a while to figure out I was the bait not the chickens and rats.”

Azuka gave her a small smile. “Can you watch them?”

Zina nodded reluctantly. “I should...”

“I can accompany her,” I offered carefully, wanting a chance to talk to her.

“She’d be of no use,” she said refusing my offer.

“I am stronger than before. You know that, Zina. I can help too.”

“Kamsie, you will be attending the ceremony with the Kamfeechi and I. You are the main spun of this plan. Nothing should happen to you before the red moon.”

“And if something does?”

“Darkness will assume its place in our lives,” Kamfeechi said carefully. “My prince, I will stay at the king’s side as always. My eyes have always been sharp. That’s the sole reason why I was appointed as regent. I will do well to watch her, and Kamsie, I hope you stay in sight.”

“Okay,” I said, unable to help myself. “I’ll be sure to stay in sight.”

Azuka cleared his throat and folds the leave. “Remember to be observant. Especially you Kamsie. The signal might be lower than you expect it to be. Keep your eyes peeled.”

“I’ll keep my ears wide. I won’t miss it,” I said depending on my new abilities. My hearing had become so sharp, I could hear the rustling of the people at the palace. At first I felt my ears were going to bleed eventually, but the necklace did well to lessen the intensity.

I reminded myself of what he said; keep your eyes peeled.

“Any questions?” When nobody raised a query, he cleared his throat again and stretched out his arm. “For our country.”

I stepped closer, as the others closed up the space to put a hand against the chocolate skin of his hand. His eyes fluttered, I could not help notice the quick weaver of his lashes and the soft bite of his lips. “For our country.”

They left me. I held my head. My thoughts were excited. When I walked out the door, the brooding guard was nowhere to be seen. A good reason why, the king never noticed.

#

Zina’s friends were in matching cricket greens, setting pots of palms at the entrance. When they saw me, they came over spotting fake grins of elegance, then bowed like esteem invites and played with their invisible horsetail. They did look royalty in their sets of beads, and the dark charcoal swirls on their forehead.

I realized how such events were a luxury to the commoners. I too would have been high of my heels if the situation were different. Their hair was put up in a bun, bead earrings dangle on their ears. Their eyes were a gleam of wonder, even though every other maiden were dressed like they were. For a reason, that made me smile. It reminded me of myself. Fully oblivious to the event to come. If we are lucky, Fanan would be taken care off outside the palace.

I offered to help as the ceremony was a dim away. In the storage, there was a fetter of colorful decorations for the floors and walls and the ceilings. Each boxes bore instructions for what decorations went to what places. I removed the lid on one and took out a glazed sculpture and placed a smaller one on it. I carried it back to where the girls were, still setting the palms. Akweake rushed to me, taking the sculptures. We make a quick work on the placements.

I spot Azuka coming up to me, bare chested with a wrapper across his torso. I supposed it was the ideal attire for a crowing occasion.

We didn’t speak to each other when he whisked me away from the girls immersed at their jobs. Abruptly, I was reminded again he was going to be betrothed today. I was never good at pressing my feelings, slightly tempted to wish him my way.

I looked at him, unaware I was being killed on the inside. There was this feeling of being left alone, distance from my desire. Of course I knew it wasn't the same but help was far out of reach. Like Okirikiri, Azuka didn't want me.

My heartbeat kept beating faster. I kept remembering the order to listen, not to get distracted by the ceremony. Instinctively, I fingered my ears and patted it tilted down in case anything stuck in without my notice. Eventually, Azuka caught on, and stared with an eyebrow raised.

I was so distracted with how I'd do, that I didn't even notice the guests piling in. It was like they planned it beforehand, to attend the ceremony as one. There were low mummies from the pack dressed much less than the king would allow, or anyone at all, but it seemed Azuka cared less. His lips were put in a grin, as he watched them. When the crowd thinned, I saw a guard with a bag forcing the guests to hand in whatever they had.

"I'm shocked the king accepted them," I whispered to him.

"It is my birthday after all. I can do whatever I want," he said and added breathlessly. "Sadly, they have to pay a token."

"That's not good."

He looked at the guard, giving a shake of his head. There was something feral in his gaze. "I should go to the king." He gave my shoulder a little squeeze before walking away.

I turned towards the place I left the girls, expecting to see them working on the designs or climbing a slab to slap paints on the walls, but the entrance was void of the girls and the other servants.

The throne room was a mask of wondrous beauty. I could see from the open doors, the throne room filled with the sounds of drums and chatter from the guests. Instead of serving as lights, the candles were used as the pillar holding up the calabash of palm wine while lanterns, a jungle of them illuminated the room, being placed in such a way the room bore a mixture of midnight black and lily yellow. Some of the lanterns were hidden behind a wooden frame, giving a large shadowy object which covered the whole room. The ends of the shadow was so dark, I supposed someone could get lost within.

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you!" Chi said coming at me from behind. Palms on my back, she stirred me into the room. We headed for the table of food where Akweake was picking greedily from the bowl of fried termites. Moments later, I found myself unable to stop letting my hands pick from each bowl and plate. The termites tasted so light and filled with juices that when they touched my tongue, they dissolved into nothingness. Chi passed me the cup of palm wine she drank from, taking only sipped it. I was not dumb enough to drink enough to make me hazy.



The drums were accompanied with oja and the bang of the double gong. This made the crowd sway to the center of the room. I spotted the chiefs in their regalia on the platform where the throne sat empty. I wondered what the king was up to. The chief who was said to rule when the king was childless sat away from the rest, closer to the throne at the left hand. His hair was hidden like the others, skin pale as ice, and achioche tied across his chest. He suddenly stood and crossed to the right where a maiden in red stood looking lost. She is dressed in a way, which spoke royalty. Her hair was decorated with beads around her forehead, colorful beads crossed her torso, falling gently on her hip, and belly button wore a neatly drawn spiral- obviously not an ordinary maiden. She knelt when she saw him, words spilling from her lips. "I greet you."

I turned away quickly too frightened to catch on.

There are others guests who were more than they seemed. I figured they were cohorts from the other kingdoms; Tiv, Edo, Yoruba and Urhobo. I've heard they visited on important ceremonies. Once, I heard they came to Tails on the day of the king's coronation to pay allegiance but I guess rumors might be true sometimes. They were a lot older than I was, by the length beards and line wrinkles on their forehead. The Oba- Edo king, was with a young boy, probably his servant? I couldn't tell if he were truly with him, because he stood way off looking around. The red vest was the initiator of my previous thought.

The sudden change of the ogene took me back to the crowd. And just then, the crowd shifted enough for me to spot Okirikiri near the shadows. He was not alone, despite the enormous space around him, it was as if no one dared to encroach. Silent discussions were made with a black-lipped woman, hair hanging on her bare shoulders. By the even dots on her shoulders, and staff of bells, I knew she was like him. I've known the other cities had others, but I hadn't seen anyone. When a man walked by, I saw just behind Okirikiri, completely swallowed by the shadows the physic of a young boy. A shudder rippled across my shoulders. I wondered who the guests saw. That's if they'd see anything as they were immersed in the music.

Somehow, I half expected the commoners to tear the palace in half but I guess nobody had the guts.

The girls wrenched me from both hands, and I stumbled after them to the center of the room. Just then, I caught sight of the hairdresser placing a leash on her children. When I blinked, the crowd had thickened around us.

We maneuvered the sweaty guests cheering with claps and hooters at a young man oscillating his hands, twisting his waists in a swatting position. He began with a light movement in a rhythmical manner before he exerted force in his performance. I was forced to clap along by the display. It reminded me of how rarely the commoners danced in smiles. Having Azuka as king would be their greatest gift.

Someone slammed into me, making my hands slip from the girls grip. As I stumbled backwards, the crowd carried me along.

“I see the necklace is safely around your neck,” Okirikiri said. “You should be prepared for what will happen in the next hour. That’s if your heart is not as weak as the months before.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, looking away to where I came. It was oing to be difficult to find the girls.

“I might not know a lot but what I do know, the gods will me not to speak or do. Its man’s will to do as he so pleases and face the consequences in the end.”

“Is that why you abandoned me? Do you know what I had to go through because of your duties?”

“Soon you’d learn. One is always better than two.” He reached into waist knots and undid one of them, pulling out a small blade. He touched the skin under his elbow lightly with the sharp end, trickles of blood lined the edges. With a straight slide, he wiped the blood off with a lone thread on his cloth and held it out to me with his whitish hand. “A gift. It should make up for everything.”

“I’m okay,” I said shaking my head.

“Are you sure?” he asked me, laughing sickly. “Do not rely on your powers Kamsie. Remember, you were once human.”

I was left speechless after he turned the blade over as he was swept away with the crowd. The conversation left me on edge, even my stomach reached in a way it left me with an urge to throw up everything I’d eaten. Okirikiri was not in the better parts of my life, and neither was he since my arrival. It was a shame if he thought, I would collect the dagger.

“Where have you been?” Chi’s voice was strained, pushing her petite body out of the throng. “We should dance before the king arrives. Come on.”

Grabbing a hold of me, Chi pushed me into the gathering once again. I wasn’t one to dance along with others or to dance at all. It was not in my favor to learn from the warden, rather a luxury for the rich and not for children whose aim is to survive. So I felt like a frog on my feet, swaying by the currents of the stream. For a while, blood rushed to my head. It was exhilarating to try out something different and I could see why the commoners were unable to stop despite their situation outside the palace grounds. The music was calloused with a satisfying drug, which filled the ears, moved the feet and bent the waist. I wondered how I looked to everyone, surely I couldn’t be as bad as the girls dancing off tune.

Soon, the slit drum joined in, adding flavor to the tune. Everyone was dancing with their arms across, and I imitated laughing at the ridiculousness. I found myself transported to oblivion, a state which was not my own, where everything seemed to disappear. Well, not until someone spoke.

“If it isn’t the human lover,” Okere said. “Haven’t seen you for a while.”

“Maybe, I don’t want to see you,” I bit back.

He smiled down at me with his eyebrows raised. Within held a sought of mischief, oozing trouble on the wrong levels yet breathtaking at the same time. I dared not compare his looks with Azuka’s. They had their own share of uniqueness.

“I can tell you’re having a great time,” he said surprising me with the tenderness in his voice.

“Of course.”

“Tell me, how the king would react if he knew you went to the record room?” he asked out of the blue. “I wonder.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” This boy was trying to get under my skin while seemingly looking innocent. There was only one other person who knew about my going to the record room, and I guessed Kamfeechi was right about not wanting her at earshot.

“Can you bet your life on it?” He was still smiling at me as though it we were having a normal conversation.

“I think you should go.” It was awkward dancing while answering to a boy who had nothing better to do than to destroy my evening.

“When were you named queen of Heads? Because I don’t remember you owning any grounds.”

“Someone like you should have something better to than to probe a young girl.”

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Uncomfortable is taking it lightly.”

“I can say the same for myself.”

I was sure my expression was unpleasant. “Remember, you came to me first. What do you really want Okere?”

“Fine you caught me. I just thought I could keep you company. I’m very sure your heart had been moaning overnight.” He leaned closer, prickling my ear with his breath. “The prince chooses a queen after all.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re on about,” I said.

“You should.”

“How do you know so much?”

“So you admit.” The words are said still in my ears, closer now. I could feel his curious breath making its way into my drums, my hairs stood erect and shoulders shuddered. “I’m always right.”

“And your gain?”

“Fun. When you derive little joy in your mother stories, you make your own.”

My body welcomed inevitable goose bumps. I didn’t like the scenario that began to form in my head. My steps flatters as the music was reduced to a hum. “The record keeper is your mother?”

“Many never see the resemblance.” And I didn’t see any resemblance other than the hard lines of their features. He pushed away and make a bow with that teasing smile of his. I watched him as he made his way away from me.

#

The girls were a wreck after an interaction with their family they hadn’t seen for a while. The drums changed in rhythm, signaling the beginning of the ceremony. The chiefs settled graciously in their seats, the ones standing to be exact. Commoners gave way, edged at opposite corners watching silently, listening for the next event. I moved forward, where it would be convenient for me to pick up the smallest sound. Where Kamfeechi would be able to spot me effortlessly.

I stopped moving when a familiar face approached. Zina was fanatically swiping spider webs from her top, face was a mask of disgust.

“Aren’t you supposed to be down?”

Her eyebrows went up, as if she wasn’t expecting me to speak. “The prince wanted me up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t question the princes orders. He knows the best.”

The crowd surged forward at the slighted sound of doors opening, but I’m rooted to the spot as Azuka led the maiden up to the platform. Zina’s eyes were also fixed at the sight, then as though she realized something, she shook her head and turned away.

There was so much enigma in that casual gesture. I tried to make myself believe we felt the same pain, but after knowing she’d known him for longer than I have, the feeling of dread came over. I couldn’t face Zina yet, not when I couldn’t get over the emotions I bore for the boy and after I blatantly refused to provide a suitable explanation that night. Instead, I focused on the entrance of the king, accompanied by the other royalties.

We were surrounded by total silence, the sounds being heard where the singular slapping of legs on the podium. The king sat on the throne from craved branches wearing his heavy beaded crown, his face serious and eyes moving around the crowd. Azuka sat on his right side, directly on the humble wooden stool and the maiden stood on the left side. The other royalties I assumed were concrete relations, sat behind the chiefs with their battering gazes settling on everything.

The first chief stood, stepped from the podium and I stared. His figure was stooped, arms locked behind his back and chest hairs peeked from his wrapper. "Today is a day which will be recoded amongst the other achievements we have gathered since the split," he said, his voice echoed throughout the room. Rarely, would anyone offer not to have heard him because he was awfully loud and clear. "The butterfly was once an egg. It lives through the storms and the scorching sun to become a slow crawling caterpillar. Eventually, that same sluggish insect grows into a butterfly. Life is a step, stages we cannot avoid no matter how hard we try."

The king stood up when the chief stepped aside, still at the bottom of the podium. By the way his mouth was twisted to a scorn, he wasn't too keen on his son's ideas, but when he saw me staring, he grinned. I quickly turned my attention to his lower half. "My people. Long have my kingdom been left without a crown prince to continue my name. Not since the tragic death of my first son. Here I present the heir on his eighteenth birthday." The crowd erupted in mummers at the prince they hadn't heard off. There were also gasps when the king's hand gestured to Azuka. "Prince Azuka shall take up the crown after me and shall be named the crown prince of Heads. And after my death, King. But as custom has it, I shall relive some of my powers to him to let him continue if anything were to happen to me. Today, you all are witnesses."

Kamfeechi and the old woman I saw speaking with Okirikiri, stepped from behind, making way through the mat. She is led by a little girl, a hand placed against her shoulders and her head tilted upwards with a steep staff rattling with each step taken. Kamfeechi went on stay behind the king, whereas the woman and her escort was left beside the podium.

"I dare ask for a drop of your blood my king," she said, and her words seemed to have left the room in a cup of silence. Her voice was like a resonating earthquake wanting to happen, scaratry like the scrapping of the iron on another.

Her escort provided a calabash, to which she held out. Quickly, Kamfeechi reached for it and brought it to the king.

"Is this something they do?" I asked.

"It's tradition according to the laws of the heads. Without the sharing of bloods, the prince cannot rule," Zina answered.

"A ritual."

"Indeed."

The king allowed Kamfeechi raise his shirt to his chest, leaving him bare. The markings on his stomach was nothing like the patterns of the nomads. Instead, they were slashes drawn deeply from his buttons and out, disappearing into the crumpled shirt. Kamfeechi took the knife from the calabash, and worked his way behind the king. Neither did the king flinch nor tremble, a true sign of his nobility which made him worthy as king. I didn't know the king's greatest achievements, but somehow I knew his decision to refuse the human was in the best interest of his kingdom, even if it meant losing his queen to death. His greed and lust for women were his own faults, and I dared to think, he should have flinched. He deserved the knife piercing deeper into his back for he had lived too long in extravagance.

When enough blood was drained, the king took in a deep breath with closed eyes, as though he enjoyed the sensation of skin being torn. The escort reached for the calabash, and gave it to the woman with a bow.

"It risks of strength and passion," she said, taking the calabash in one hand. "I ask the kingdom of heads. Do you accept the words of your king to crown prince Azuka as the next in line?"

I wondered if they expected her words. My curiosity was put at ease when they echoed. "We accept."

"Then I call on my prince."

Azuka rose from his place with poised movements. He moved forward to stand beside his father with few steps, intertwining their arms swiftly. This was the first time and possibly the only time I would witness the royalty in close range. Standing next to his father, he emanated the essence of authority and ability to raise the court as he so wished.

I couldn't fathom how he was feeling with the thousands of eyes staring from all sides. I remembered he told me this was not he truly wanted from the onset. Inside I believed, his love for books was seating wailing to be let out.

"My prince. To be the crown prince of this great kingdom, you must accept the words of your king," she said. "So the gods bear me witness and everyone in this kingdom as I ask my prince. Do you accept?"

"I accept the words of my king to be the crown prince and share a taste of his blood," Azuka said bravely, and in that moment I truly believed he was now accustomed to the wishes of his brother. There was no going back now.

"Now, I shall anoint this token of power," - she raised the calabash above her head. Her hands were quivering and so was the ground underneath my feet. But it was not enough to make us lose our balance. "Azumiri ona ku."

This time, Azumiri walked up the podium bowing her head against the edges of the calabash. Azuka, untwined his arm and took the calabash. “Your wish is my command.”

I made a face as he gulped down the contents. At once, the crowd resonated in a sudden clap and I couldn’t help myself than to do the same. “To seal it in, I ask the royalties and chiefs to give your reward.”

Kamfeechi made his way to the seated set after Azuka had handed the empty calabash to him. The first chief plucked it out of his hands and spat in it. I visibly recoiled. The others collected in a synchronized motion, ejecting saliva forcibly from their mouth into the same calabash. Eventually, it was passed back to Kamfeechi who in turn returned it to Azumiri.

Azumiri walked closer to the prince. She dug her hands into the calabash and painted his back. Now I knew why he had to remain bare chested. Azuka didn’t flinch nor twitch an eye like his father. She came over to paint his front chest, making horizontal lines with her five fingers, then slapped it hard once. When she was done, she stepped back to admire her work. I couldn’t be sure, but seemed like it. She appeared to have gone motionless, back facing us and head tilted to the side.

“What is she doing?”

“Waiting for the red moon.” Zina was disturbed, and so was I. It was getting closer. I noticed Kamfeechi nod slowly with unspoken words and it went along the line of, ‘get ready. If he gets in, you know what to do.’ Instinctively, I searched the room for unfamiliar faces. It would have a lot easier if the room wasn’t filled with unfamiliar faces and less crowded. When I thought of Fanan already in the premises, my palms cramped and legs weakened like juices.

I should keep my eyes peeled too.

In the tiniest of holes, a deep silver of light from the moon eternally graced the spot separating the crowd from the podium. It came like a mother ready to sing to her child a lovely lullaby, to ease her children of their newly found fears. The powers in me was busting open, begging me to let it out. Seemingly, I was the only one at the tip of my toes, forcing my brewing pickling sensation down. This was the effect, he told me about.

Azumiri brought the ends of her staff down hard against the ground and I felt the vibration in my legs. “The red moon has awoken more than the new gifts. It has giving us a crown prince to lead.”

I formed a fist to regain my composure but it was doing less than I imagined. There was an urge to pike off the necklace, but I knew it would make everything worse.

The king wore a look of exceptional pride. The crown gleamed from the moonlight, glowing as if it were specially made for it. “I present an opportunity for my son to address the people.”

Azuka bowed before his father, and the room erupted in cheers. Was it wrong to think the guest were being a bit too cheerful?

My gaze seized Zina's who is still standing, her attention to the entrance of the room. Okirikiri was leaning against the feast table, boring holes in the ground. Like he knew I'd been watching him, he raised his head and met mine. He acknowledged me with a look that I couldn't help but think was of regret, then started towards the entrance. Almost immediately, Chibuzor runs in fanatically.

As my eyes rested on his bloodied shirt, I knew something was wrong.

"My people. I thank you for accepting me as the rightful heir to the throne," he said. At this, the crowd erupted in another fit of cheers. At the raise of a palm, he silenced them. "There is a saying that the light of day can over shadow the darkness of the night. I never knew what it meant until today. It took a lot of sacrifices to get to where I am today. And I don't regret any of it even when it took a life."

This will end things he said.

"I remember when I was a young boy. I was kept in the shadows and my brother was always given the heavy task. I wanted that heavy burden and how I have it and I plan to use it to better our kingdom," he continued. "There will be changes from now on starting from today." Azuka gestured to the guards tugging a number of people up on the podium.

"It was a lie," Chibuzor said, breathing heavily.

Zina was blinking uncontrollably, trying to fight the tears in her eyes. "I knew it."

"Tell me what the problem is?" I asked trying to control the quiver in my voice.

"I went down to check on the snakes because I was worried they might move away without one watching them. But they were gone. Then I checked the barricades. Nothing."

I pushed past the dozens munching down yam chips, a lady unable to keep herself from swaying to nothing and a man trying to keep her in place. They cursed at me, perhaps I may have moved the lady too hard that her legs were no longer balanced. I saw the king shift uncomfortably on his feet, then he turned to face Azuka. Chibuzor charged ahead of me, throwing more people aside- grunts followed in his wake.

Up on the podium, the guards charged his captors to their knees. Their faces duly shielded by black cloth, covering their foreheads to their chin. I stopped moving when the Chibuzor wrenched his blade from his sheath, and held it with its tip under Azuka's neck. Everything was happening too fast for me to comprehend.

"This was not the plan," Chibuzor admonished speaking in a tone I had never heard him address the prince.



“Everyone has a tendency to make plans,” Azuka said and bore a smile which made my insides turn. “The downside of it all is that, it doesn’t always go the way we plan. So I urge you to let down your sword.” All around, the guards undid their swords. It was a scalding sound when done at once.

Unable to react to prudent happenings, I gripped my wrapper.

“We both know I can very much take them all at once,” Chibuzor said harshly. “I don’t know what you are trying to gain by acting this way....”

“Of course you wouldn’t. I’m doing it all for my people.”

“Azuka,” the king cautioned.

“I stand on this podium to fulfil the wishes we have all been yearning for,” Azuka announced without acknowledging that the king had spoken. “Years after years you have offered in throughout the rule of my father. Am I not correct?”

“You are,” the crowd echoed.

“Azuka!” the king exclaimed. “What is this madness?”

“Shut up old man,” Azuka said. Unable to help myself, I let out a nasty gasp at his words. He may have hated his father, but to insult him in public was truly unacceptable.

“Do not forget that I am still the ruler of this kingdom,” the king said gesturing to the crowd, then motioned to the guards who surprisingly turned their swords from Chibuzor to the king. Azuka laughed at this, like an overly drunk palm wine tapper. The king looked stunned.

“Drop your swords. He is still your kin after all,” Azuka said casually. At his comment, the guards obeyed. He walked two steps and thrust out his arm to a guard closest to him. He collected his sword and touched the sides like he was measuring its sharpness. Swiftly, he whipped it without looking, and struck one of the individuals on their knees. Heparin a female scream, I assumed it may have been a her.

“How dare you!” the King screamed. “This is a sacred ground.”

Azuka shrugged nonchalantly like he had killed a fly. “Sorry about that. I just thought, you would like to see human bloodshed.”

Human blood? This was not the Azuka I knew.

“This is not right.” With a yell, Chibuzor charged forward, Azuka’s hand came up and stopped his sword mid strike. “What has gotten into you.”

“Are you mad with anger because I killed one of you? Don’t say you feel for this insect after they gave up on you?”

At that, Chibuzor's arm weakened, enough for Azuka to leave an everlasting mark on his chest. Someone in the crowd shirked, and I think it came from me. His sword crumbled as he stumbled backwards into the arms of two guards who held onto him. I never knew the story of Chibuzor, and from their conversation, I could tell it was nothing pleasant.

By now, I expected the crowd to flee for their lives but they just stood, watching the events expressionless. I couldn't stop the heart splitting thought, the commoners knew Azuka's plans.

The king, reached to the sky like he wanted the moon to give him the necessary strength. But, Azuka caught his arm and wrenched it down. Despite the amount of effort the king exerted, he could not set himself free.

"How." The king turned sharply to Azumiri. "How much were my powers taken?"

"The same amount to give, your highness," she answered.

"Then where..."

It happened like lightening. Kamfeechi barreled himself down the podium and hurled me up. He had a small knife behind my neck, keeping me from wrenching myself free. I was thrown beneath Azuka's feet, my knees slammed on the ground harshly and my hands formed an inevitable fist.

A shadow crouched in front of me. With a hand softly under my chin, my head was tilted upwards to meet familiar eyes. Eyeballs shifted down to my neck, then swiftly and bleakly, the necklace was plucked. I waited for the powers to come, to tear the throne room in half. There was nothing. Instead, the markings on my body slowly faded until it was reduced to my bare skin.

"Surprised?" he mocked. "I understand. I admit I fooled you to get enough powers to take the throne. The commoners would have all starved by the time the king welcomes death."

For a moment I was relieved. He had the feelings of the commoners in mind like he always wanted. The guards' loyalties had been bought, the other kings refused to interfere and watched like everyone did but his ways weren't proper. I was the spun in the coup. If I weren't so trusting of a marked one, I would have been well off. But then, I had no choice because Hanye was taken. Hanye? Okirikiri knew what would happen before he did, and he had abandoned me once again in the face of danger.

"Was Fanan even real?"

"We all believe a lie to be the truth at some point," he said.

"Then Hanye..."

“Yes I took her. How else was I going to have you? The village was a mistake actually, the bush babies were too excited.”

“And the book?”

“It pains me to say, I am not good at opening things,” he said. “And it’s never too bad to have some fun in-between. But of course not all was a lie, Fanan did live. Just wasn’t too strong to continue without souls to feed on. My ancestors were dully wrong.”

A bolt was fired from the crowd at Azuka. He staggered only for a moment. Zina ran forward, whipping a rope coated with something black. This reminded me that Zina possessed similar chi to mine. She should be able to...

Azuka threw his sword and it pierced her chest. It wasn’t possible. He cared for her, he wouldn’t kill someone he saved from death. Although, he acted harshly when it came to her caring for him, he wouldn’t kill her. Like always, I was wrong. He got there, slamming the blade deeper into her chest. Zina spat purple blood from her mouth. Cruelly Azuka, pulled the sword out and thrust back in and finally out. Chibuzor’s screams were blood cuddling and I was taken back to the day Tails was attacked.

My heart was beating heavily in my chest. I barely could hear the next words that splashed from his lips, loud ringing replaced whatever yells and screams. I was still.

Anyone would admire anothore who gave up his mates for te sake for a greater good if the situation were different. He hadn’t blinked twice before he slautered Zina infront of the podium, the place the king called sacred. With the amount of blood spilled, I doubt it could be called sacred anymore.

The orature. He must have announced to the people the princes plan o take over.

“You are no longer my son,” the king mummmed, his voice drowned by Chibuzor’s unending wails.

The prince betrayed the crown and the king was now helpless. The former looked amiable satisfied with himself. “Shall we move on?”

“Have you not done enough,” I surprised myself by saying. Azuka’s face lit up in a fiery smile as he moved behind the masked individuals. The clothes came off one at a time, showing the faces underneath. There was no mistaking the bulgy arms. Then slowly, I began to realize as he revealed, how strikingly familiar the others were. The peddler I had tried to save, carpenters, farmers and the children. Tobi was there too, alongside the other children. “Hanye.” My voice was shaky. She turned to me and my heart was shattered. It was one of the rarest moments, I would catch Hanye stricken with tears. She was always the braver one.

Tobi was making a terrible keening sound. The peddler stared at the crowd in horror. Azumiri turned away like the sight sickened her, hiding her face in the depth of silver hair. It sickened me when the crowd began to cheer, at the sight of many in the face of doom.

“There was one thing we agreed with in terms of the king’s rule. The humans caused us more than good because of their greed. And forever we will be enemies,” he finished staring me in the eyes. It was challenging, it was indeed challenging my thoughts of wanting to merge kingdoms. “Although Kamsie here is no longer with powers to be called one of us, I ask you to grant her as exceptional for giving me the strength to do this for our kingdom. Without the people there is no power.”

“Yeah!” they screamed.

“They must get what they deserve!”

“Yeah!”

“Heads will be great again!”

“Yeah!” Their voices rattled the tables.

“Do you agree my chiefs,” Azuka asked, holding out his sword in front of them.

“We do your highness,” they echoed. At this, the king collapsed on his throne, crown tilted to the left about to fall off. Azuka ordered Kamfeechi to bring the crown to him. The maiden, instead picked it. Apparently, she was closer than he was. My gaze was searching for someone, anyone who had the guts to stop the madness, but the cheers were overwhelming.

Azuka raised his hands to stop her advancing. He ordered for the first chief to move forward to crown him king and he did, stirring a new fit of cheers.

“Azuka. On the blood you shed, the gods must punish,” Chibuzor spat.

“Now choose, who goes first,” Azuka asked.

“No!” I screamed crawling to his feet. Now my hands trembled, my body shivered. It was a surprise I was still awake. I was too late, the peddler fell to his death, his fingers laced together in prayer. It was okay to believe in the gods in times where things went wrongly. Hanye was no longer making any sound, staring at the falling body. But I wouldn’t say the same for the children. Their cries were like wailings from fishermen who lost their fishes after their boat capsized at sea, and it was their greatest catch of the season. “No! Stop!” they were the words I could only say.

I felt something on my face when he struck Tobi. His head rolled off, at the brutal strike of his blade.

“You could have taken only me. They did nothing,” I pleaded.

“Their existence is disturbance,” a man yelled from the crowd. Then like a nest of bees, they buzzed the word ‘kill’.

They delighted in murder, bloodthirsty and never forgiving for the mistake of the Human ancestors. The humans were to blame but these were descendants who had nothing to do than find a means to survive. Hanye was right to believe the marked ones were evil. Her parents were killed by them, after all.

“To Heads!”

I closed my eyes and my ears because I couldn’t watch any longer. I knew there was nothing I could do with no sword and no chi. I was useless like how I’d always been; easy to fall and quick to trust.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I was lost in the abyss. I was that child again searching for her father in the emptiness of the surface, with a basket clutched to my very chest.

Everything before me was contained in the blackness of my heart which tuddered unessacary from my thoughts. If I had any thoughts left, that is. What was there to think about anyways, the betrayal of a tender one or the brutal sluttering of humans. Fear would not let neither my thoughts nor my mouth stray to the calling of names.

I was that child again with a hole in her chest. My eyes were open wide and yet I barely saw and this was not because the room had lost its light.

I was that child who thought nothing else could shock her but here I was creepled on the cold hard ground, with bars caging me in the room I once called my own. Death was a blood curdling experience to the one who watched and the other who experienced- and I guessed the former bore the burden especially if anyone were in my shoes. There was so much of it, too many screams accompanied with the splashes of blood- my whole front was covered in it.

I kept going back to Tobi's lifeless eyes, Hanye's heightened breath, Zina's blood dripping on Azuka's blade and the peddler's last screams. It was all I could remember.

Never had I thought, Azuka's plans were any different from ours. He was good, too good of a performer to have me play in his games. I thought of the greater impact the acts of his father must have ranged his utmost hate. His was right, these were no longer a quest to fufuil his brothers wishes, he acted on them like he bore the right to correct the wrongs.

I sat there and waited for my heart to still. There were many thing that could go wrong from now but I knew my death was far from reach. He was very clear on his will to let me live. There was a bang on the door, and with no sign from me to indicate I was in, it got louder shaking the mud above. Pieces from the corners responded greatly to the impact, causing them to fall in small chunks.

The door finally bust open, and Aruna's face came into view.

"Get up," she commanded. "Aruna was ordered to bring you."

My stomach twisted anxiously, but I obeyed and rose to my feet. Her face was smudged but her eyes were focused above my head. As soon as we stepped outside the door, we were flanked my guards who escorted us to the kings quarters. Without the red x sign, I knew it was no place for anyone to work passed or through.

The quarters was unguarded. The one who escorted us, took their places at each side and Aruna nodded to them.

Gently, she pushed the door in. Distracted by the shred of light within, her other hand found its way to the tiny hairs on my neck. I jerked away.

“The king awaits,” she said with a toothed smile. I strode passed her and entered with a shaky breath.

The door slid shut behind me and I took a step forward. The room was a large cocoon of green and lit by the natural light from above. From the holes of light, doves flew on and about the tree twisted in a way I never thought a tree would. There were long red cloths standing at guard at each end and in front a mass of heavy wood. Bowls of water decorated the corners where patches of stones replaced the mats I was used to seeing in the palace.

Azuka sat at the bottom of the heavy wood, his arms spread wide on the support, watching the birds flock around. The moment a dove cooed, a smile was drawn on his lips. I maneuvered my way through the stones to avoid an uneventful fall, and stood before him without offering a bow.

“You’ve come,” he said. “I was starting to worry the Oroma might have gotten your head.”

I said nothing and stared. The smile only widened a fraction, and he went back to watching the birds.

“Aren’t they beautiful? The birds I mean. They flock around uncaring for what would happen next. They are attracted only to the beautiful things around us.” He stuck out his hands above and a dove flew down and perched at the tip of his finger.

I held my lips trying to keep myself from speaking dreadful words.

“Say something,” he urged.

“There is nothing I can say.”

“I know you have a lot.”

“And why would you think that?”

“After last night.”

“What about last night?” I asked. “What did you do that you think I have something to say about it.”

“You’re playing with your words.”

“I beg to differ.”

He took in a sharp breath and released the dove with a flicker of his finger. He glanced at me with feeble exasperation. “You don’t believe I have done well.”

"I'm surprised anyone," I whispered trying to keep control of my voice. "There is more to believing than the mere words itself."

"What if I tell you that such surprises will never happen again?" He stood up and approached me, his bare feet soundless like air. "I keep my words to my people and to no other."

"You are saying..."

"Heads needs a queen," he said softly holding my chin.

"You have a queen," I replied leaning forward.

"The people will want you dead as long as they know you are human. It is the only way to keep you from getting torn by their hands."

"A concubine?"

"I prefer queen better. It sounds more majestic."

The breath in me escaped through the open holes in my body and I had to bite my lips. Azuka was a performer, but I didn't think he was lying. Although he had killed Zina, I felt he might have done it to prove a point. I pressed at this.

"Zina was your person."

"Indeed but the people must know I will do so much to protect them even though it means the death of a close one."

"And possessed dark magic?"

"Wouldn't you do the same if you were in my shoes?" he asked his voice bemused. "I plan to not harm you whatsoever but I cannot guarantee your safety. Choose." He wrenched his hand back and gave a short laugh. "You must know death is not a beautiful experience."

I knew I should have kept quiet, play along with his plans while figuring out a way to escape. "How do you feel? You took lives of those dear to me. So tell me King, do you feel content?"

"You cannot blame me."

"That was not what I asked?"

He ran a hand along his jaw, his eyes crinkled and his expression frustrated, fatigued and exhausted. There were wrinkles along his forehead, dark circles around his eyes, almost as if his night was sleepless. "Honestly, it was not my plan," he said. "I wanted to show them I was more than mere words. Action always spoke better. I'm ashamed to say it went to my head but I do not regret any action I took."

"You might as well be like your father."



“How?” He strode back to his chair.

“Not now. But someday. You said it yourself. The power went to your head. When in power you can lord over the greater minority.” Even if it meant wrenching one’s soul.

“I am not like my father.” His hand tightened on a baranch. “And I never will.”

“You are scared. You are scared you might end up like your father. The coup was your plan to prove to everyone you were nothing like him. But I’m sorry to say, this is only the beginning.”

His answer was a heart tearing laugh.

“Lying your way through sends the wrong message king,” I continued. “I…”

“The people loved it! You heard their cheers. This is what they need and it is what they will get.”

“They need a sincere king.”

“I am sincere. I stayed through to my promise.” He laughed again. “See you talking about my flaws. What do they have to do with ruling a kingdom? One needs to be strong to be able to go past their limit to achieve what they want. What I want!”

“It is not how things are.”

“How would you know? You have never been in my shoes. To take risky actions.”

“I stand corrected if what I say is wrong. If going off with strangers who my town believed were always evil to save my friend is not risky, I don’t know what is.”

“I had a kingdom to lose. Our status cannot be measured.”

“That’s not reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” He scoffed. “Still you challenge a king with your words. Anyone who hears would as well believe what I say because I am the king even though they know my actions are far from being righteous.”

“Your actions can never be justified.”

“The gods may lay their spit on my grave but I regret nothing. I did what needed to be done. Someone needed to liberate them from their pains.”

Would I have done the same if I were him? He sounded so wounded, so sincere, I almost thought he had a good heart. I gave a single shake of my head.

“Did you kill your brother.” I paused. “Purposely?”

He slumped back on his seat and stared me down with hawk eyes. “You wound me.”

“How did you expect me to think?”

He cocked his head to one side, a small frown playing on his lips. Then it disappeared as soon as it came and was replaced by something I could not lay my finger on. He stretched forth his hand, and the door slid open once again. I didn't look to see who came in.

Aruna stood beside me and bowed to Azuka. When she walked forward I noticed she wasn't alone. The former king seemed much less of royalty and rather like the commoners. His fingers were intertwined below his chin and eyes focused on the ground. I noticed the smallest quiver in toes, the hesitation in voice, causing light screeching sounds. “Speak,” Azuka said.

“I... I.” He swallowed. “W-where do I go?”

“Where ever you want to. It's a free world father.”

“But...”

“As you can see, I'm having an important meeting,” Azuka said.

The former king glanced at me, then his lips were twisted in a scowl. “I still have my rights! I ruled over this kingdom...”

“And now you're not.”

“I refuse to walk away after I've been unjustly removed.”

“Then my guards would be at your back and call by night,” Azuka replied. “Just not the kind you wish for, that is.”

“You can't mean...”

“Death,” he said with a shrug. “Choose what you think is best. Honestly, I'm fine with whatever, as long as you're away and gone for good.” Azuka turned away from him putting an end to the conversation. He raised his hands and motioned for me to move closer. Fear gripped me, unknowing what he might do if I were to close the distance. I shuffled my feet, and eventually closed the distance. Hands guided me to the space beside him, and I sat bending my knees away from him to keep them from touching. “Aruna?”

“Yes my king.”

“Kindly show the visitor out,” he instructed.

Aruna bowed and grabbed the former king's sleeve, pulling it forward. Something broke loose inside him causing him to lunge for his son, clawing at him, screaming profanities. Aruna was on him, holding him tightly as he thrashed.

“The gods punish you,” he spat.

“The gods punish you as well.”

Reluctantly, he allowed he lead him to the door and out, but not without sneaking a glance at his son. Tiniest it may have been, but I saw the glimmer of his tears ready to spill.

Azuka reached out and touched the skin above my breasts, gliding his warm fingers to the deepened hole in my neck. I felt his minty breath shower me, and had the urge to throw up. The feeling of enjoyed over shadowed the ones of repulsion and I hated the way my body reacted.

“What do you think?” he asked airily.

“Of what?” I whispered.

“My father. Do you think he deserves the punishment I set out?”

“Are you seeking for my honest opinion or you just want to hear me speak?”

He laughed. “A little bit of both actually.”

I said nothing. The former king truly deserved what had come to him.

“Tell me your answer,” he said, gliding my face to meet his at close range. His face looked leak under the natural lights. “Be my queen. I have the powers to make you my first and the other behind. The court knows not to question the king.” Of course they wouldn’t dare, he was stronger than them all. It would be stupid to succumb to his request even though I knew it would keep me alive, being wed to him would increase my guilt. I would be sawing myself when I hadn’t saved my people, Hanye.

“Just allow me leave. Throw me out like you did your father.”

“You wound me, Kamsie,” he said again.

“I can look out for myself.”

He cocked his head to one side, a small assuring smile playing on his lips. “Perhaps you will change your mind soon.”

“Why?”

“A time is upon us. A time where the people have a say in the workings of the court. It’s the least I can do for them.”

“So I will be allowed to leave if they say so?” A sliver of hope bloomed within me.

“Yes, Kamsie,” he said stroking my hair. “I will let you go if they say otherwise.” He leaned forward, putting my nose on my shoulders. “But I doubt they will be that merciful. Some maybe but a vast majority will not. And if they do, you will accept my offer. I swear it.”

“You have confidence in yourself.”

“I go for what I can win.”

“What you can win?”

“I go with my guard to the other kingdom in tails,” he said. “I shall conquer your neighboring kingdoms and make them my own.”

“You wouldn’t,” I cried, my voice like metal. He winced, loosening his grip and got up. I watched him move forward, his hands crossed behind him. “You said you wouldn’t...”

“It is what the people want.”

“We are not a threat to you and you know that.”

“Then you may as well take up your role as queen and convince them otherwise.” He smiled then, and behind his eyes I saw the same insane intent of that night swimming underneath. “Tomorrow at dawn I address my people. You may choose to accompany me or do otherwise.” He waved his hands dismissively and Aruna returned.

A sob tore loose from my lips. The tears I had fought back, chimed in my greatest distress. “You are sick.”

“The hours are counting.”

“How could you!”

He shrugged. “Take her to her room and keep her there.” He instructed Aruna. She grabbed my arms and held me tight, my tears still rolling down my cheeks. I couldn’t help but doubt his intentions. He wanted me for something, which was the only reason he wanted to keep me in disguise of preserving my life. I knew it.

Azuka was going to raid all of Tails. The pains were too much for me to handle and without a bat of my eyes, I would be better if I were dead. Hanye was gone anyways, I shouldn’t care. But I did.

Aruna yanked me out the door and back to my room. “Aruna wishes you do as the king says.”

I pressed my fingers against my eyes. “Is this what he promised you? To be his lackey?”

“Aruna gets a place where she belongs,” she whispered furiously. “And so do the babies.”

“Leave.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” she hissed and followed through the open door and out. She didn’t bother to close the door and I quickly realized that Aruna wanted to watch me closely without having to breathe down my neck.

As I watched the maidens passing, sneaking glances inside my room I couldn't help but feel naked. I felt an urge to run out or maybe through the window, away from the weird stiffness crackling around.

"Halt!" I heard a guard flanking the entrance ask. Muffled voices followed next, then ever so slowly, a familiar face came into view.

"Chibuzor?"

In seconds his expression was one of relief. Chibuzor and I had never been close enough to call ourselves friend, but I was relieved to see him as well. I flew to my feet and I clinged on him for as long as my tears turned his shirt translucent.

"I can't stay for long." I stifled my sobs and withdrew to my bed. He looked behind him and turned to me. His eyes moved around my face. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Fresh tears spilled from my eyes. "I'm sorry for yours too."

He smiled sadly, then he spoke with urgency as he sat beside me. "I have a plan to get you out."

"But he's going to..."

"Not everyone in court supports his rule. I will try as much as possible to convince them to help me stall till I find a way to persuade the people and disperse his mission."

I let out a laugh in between my sob. "If only I had my powers. I would have been able to do something. I'm as weak as I've always been."

He shook his head in disapproval. "That's the thing Kamsie. You were never weak, just uninformed."

"Well if I were informed..."

"If were all informed, things would have turned out differently but here we are caught up in a spiders web."

I looked down at my pale fingers and up to him. "There's something you're not telling me."

"Indeed," he said a little too feebly. "Today might not be the right time."

"I don't think any day will ever be. Tell me."

"So maybe your powers can be restored, not completely but enough to pull him off his throne, but it would take enough effort to be able to get it back." He took my hands into his cold ones tightly, and held it close to my abdomen. "It's in here hiding. Only a matter of time before it

comes back. And he knows it. He knows how powerful you are. Keeping you closer is his way of watching you.”

“How do you know this?”

“Okirikiri came to find me...”

“For someone who wants to wash his hands clean...”

“Whether he like it or not, there is a part of you inside of him.”

“Do you blame me for everything, for the things that happened? I was quick to believe whatever they told me. I was used against my wish. For everytime I trusted whatever he said, the direction they set me through.”

“You have a chance to make it right.”

“How sure are you?”

“This is about fate and not a matter of choice. You were made to restore not destroy. Although your true purpose was not fulfilled, this is a greater treat.”

I managed a small smile. Yet crooked. “True. It is a greater treat.”

He clutched my hands tighter and moved it closer to my heart. “The choices you make takes you closer to fulfilling that fate. So I ask, come with me and harness the powers inside of you.”

Okirikiri grunted and Chibuzor grinned. “Together we can restore this kingdom,” Chibuzor said.

They left me alone after with my thoughts. To keep myself occupied, I wrote on the leave I’ve never gotten tired of. For once it was not about decoding a song- one I’ve not sang in a while, instead it was a story about the children at the orphanage. The angry rasp of the warden when she yelled our names, her cat who hissed in his vicious tone, the coweries Hanye and I hid buried underground, how we told stories amongst ourselves, the farmers neighbours sweating as they tilled the soil, the boys I never really knew. I missed them all.

One minute I found myself finishing and another reading the words out loud, a way to fill my heart once more with warmth. I’d been at the assembly, reading to the children with their pens dripping with ink staining the pages of their scrolls. I laughed out loud. I noticed the guards sneaking a glance, they must have thought I’d gone mad. Maybe I was. Maybe the life in me was sucked dry.

Choices he said, any choice would eventually lead to my fate. And that hadn’t meant I had to go with any. I was worn out from being the follower, what if I made the decision alone? I was five again running the hallway with Hanye in tow. Our giggles echoed in the empty hall, but we were not afraid we’d be heard. It was the day after I’d met her, after I knew my problems

were not the worst thing to happen to a child. We played a bit too much for our liking, knocking one of the lanterns to the ground.

We were beaten that day, one after the other in the warden's office. Slowly, my hands reached to the back of my knees where my mark stayed unladed. I remembered my palms being sweat in fear, the unending pool of tear from Haney's eyes. I was scared out of my wits but I knew I had to swallow my fears for I wouldn't end up dead. This reminded me of the problems I faced.

In the creaking silence of my room, I stretched out against the bed, tired of the world around me. I fell asleep that way, knowing what my decision would be. It was time to do things my way for a change without fear.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dawn was creeping in as maidens spilled into the room with boxes of clothes, trays of makeups and rolls of delicate beads. My limbs felt heavy, unwinding them from the sheet of wrapper around me. Someone must have placed it when I was asleep. I was trying to get my vision right when Aruna entered with a carton of combs and hair ornaments. She was going to get her way after all.

The moment reminded me of the time Zina wrenched me clean of my clothes.

The maidens stirred me into the outside bath, washing my body with black soap and scrubbing between my toes with chewing sticks. After which, they applied palm kernel oil on my hair, combing it through with hot brushes. I allowed them tug on all sides, unable to feel anything on my scalp. Soon Aruna took over, plaiting my hair into tiny braides.

When she had finished, they helped me into a wrapper tied to my chest, falling to my ankles. The beads were cold against my collar bones when they fell, sitting graciously on the wrapper folds. I was led out of the room where Kamfeechi was waiting.

“Shall we?” he said refusing to meet my eyes. He led me to the carriage, where guards flanked all round. There were no hood on this carriage. It was open to fresh air, and to the commoners flanking the entrance of the gates- if it weren’t for the guards they would have stormed in to greet their king. The other queen was sitting on the left hand of the king and I was helped to the right.

He had the audacity to welcome me with his heart stopping smile, holding his hands out to guide me to my seat. I returned the smile of course. What would the people think of a queen to be unhappy about her wedding? It was the best way to convince everyone I had succumbed to his wishes. Chibuzor and Okirikiri must have thought I had betrayed them but that wasn’t the case. They were wrong. I was an empty case with a ruthless plan.

Azuka wanted the wedding to be public, where the people can share in the activities of the court. The maidens lined up in a file behind, following in an orderly fashioned way. Chi and Akwaeke were within close range, processing alongside the carriage. The chiefs were separated in two half’s, one at my side and the others opposite. I studied them curiously. Their movements were stiff, and expression hard. *Not everyone in court supported his decision.*

The court was a mere shadow of the king, and basically high ranging commoners below the king. To preserve their life, it was better not to interfere. I wondered how they would have convinced them otherwise. The marked one’s weren’t any different from the human.



There was silence as we continued the trek outside the palace covered in grace and delight and in my case, dread. Not because I was soon to be queen, or the beads weighing me down. Then there was a scream.

“All hail the king!”

The chorus echoed from the crowd in steady rhythm who had garnished our sides, in elegant postrate. I used to take descisions without thinking twice. A lady with a baby stropped to her back leaped to her feet, being the first to follow like a wounded dog. The others followed immediately, with continuous chourous of their hails.

I however looked past them. Chibuzor caught my eyes from the thickness of the crowd, eyebrows up in question, cradling his wounded arm which was now covered with cloth d=strapped to his neck. I looked away, staring straight ahead.

Our destination was within eye sight. The first time I’d entered Heads, the market square was void of life, marred with dust circulating the aminos air. Thou8gh empty at the time, I was stuck to a purpose with bubbling life. Now, everything was the opposite of what it was. Noise arose from the depths of the square, bore to life by the rackets and lifeful rhythms of the peoples raising hails while dust marred my heart instead. The overjoy was suffocating, the beads feeling heavier than it had already been. I eventually had to undo the thread.

The king stared straight ahead unmoving of his people’s remarks, radiating with confidence and pride. For a while I watched the sun rise up, warming my skin with its radiant light. With a yell from a guard upfront, the carriage screech to a stop.

The maiden who had let me up appeared to my side to let me down. The clouds shifted, and the drums began. It started out smoothing with dot beats, then burst into a thunderous one. Okirikiri and Azumiri emerged from a hut in white regalia and their sticks, rattling with their steps. Around their left ankles, rattles rattled like double gongs, feathers on their heads from chickens and peacocks. Even I was taken aback from their looks.

Guards escorted Azuka forward, one in front and another behind. Not that he needed such protection. Chi and Akwaeke reported to do the same, propelling me to his side. Spirit servants served their master with a calabash, which they took and raised it above their head.

Other guard reached for touched I hadn’t noticed. Huge cloud of flames bust from their hands, lighting the touch with orange flames. Soon, strings of lightening whipped across the ends of the calabash, accompanied with thunderous noises. I saw the dim shape of a hand, dipping into the calabashed. But it was gone before I blinked. I knew I hadn’t imagined it. The Ezemors took the calabashes down and turned it over. White liquid poured to the ground.

“The gods did not strike us dead,” Okirikiri said.

“The gods approve!” Azumiri finished. “Let the ceremony begin.”

The silence was sliced with the piercing chime of the flute. I should remember this was for the humans, I owed it to them. When the Ezemor gave way to the entrance to the hut, I though I was going to be led inside. The madiens stirred me to the left, away from Azuka who I'd noticed was moving the opposite direction.

"Here." A hand holding a cup slammed my chest. Another took hold of my hand, and I felt it rise, to take the cup whose liquid was staining my wrapper. A faint smell of taint fiber and molted weed filled my nostrils.

There was an unnerving feeling surrounding me. It was similar to that time Zina had taken me to the dinner room for the first time. I wondered how she managed the gravity of tense hostility from the mummurs. I pretended not to have seen hands cupped over ears.

"Find your Obi," they cahanted.

Azuka wasn't difficult to find in the crowd, his newly feathered hat stuck out above many heads. Nothing was seeming interesting, so there was no need to pay attention to the rest of the ceremony.

We were seated in front of the hut, watching dancers and muscisns entertain. Azuka's hand found mine tucked under my armpit, and I felt it respond to his warm ones, in a resounding clap. It came to me that the performers were waiting for my approval. Eventually, it was something I was going to have to get used to now I was queen. Queen. The word bearily sunk in.

A tapper came up next, swaying on his feet. Unsure what he wanted to do, I leaned in curious about his performance. He drew a bottle of palm wine from his underclothes, and I saw a gash of fresh wound lying below his button just before he covered it up. Pouring the contents on where he stood, what looked like a pebble (larger than normal) fell on the spot. He moved diagonally and did the same, only moving when a pebble dropped. Ever so slightly, his beaded wrist flickered when he changed his course. I couldn't help but think, he was one of the many who possessed a Chi.

I heard screams of terror. And people began streaming from the corners, thicking the contours of the market square or so I thought. Bush babies spilled in and I was surprised the people and't gone screaming off. The mummer of course rose, the chiefs stirred nervously. I saw children, human children in the clutches of the babies whimpering. I could see the long line of scratches on their arms.

The children were thrown inside the beads, I realized formed a circle. I felt a spike of horror as I slighly understood what he was going to do. On impulse, I faced him.

"You promised!" I cried desperately.

Azuka raised his hands, ignoring me banly. He didn't need to give any signmal, his eyes said it all.

It started slowly with sharp claws. The beads released a transparent smoke, covering the children in with the babies. They wouldn't be able to fight them off, and he knew that. The walls surrounding them swelled, like it was intended to radiate steam. The children were screaming again, blood curdling scream at the realization of their soon to be deaths. I saw their fear, watched their tears flood in endless streams as the babies stole from them the gift of life. Seemless to say, it was better to watch Azuka's sword slicing open Zina a thousand times.

It got to me as blood sprayed on the walls around them, Azuka hadn't wanted his people to be stained. His people. It was always about his people. An obsession which was never going to be vanquished unless the human race seized to exist.

This was the beginning, soon he would go on to the towns in Tails. I turned to look at the crowd, the nauseating sight of their cheer made me sick. I made the wrong choice again.

I tried to reach inside of me desperately, trying to find the powers they believed I still possessed to save the children. The desperation became unbearable when women ran to the shield, trying to tear it apart. I was alone. It was either me or nobody else. It was clear I had to be patient, but I had no time. Jumping in would make it worse, the people's doubt would lead to my death and then, I'd not helped anyone.

"Stop this!" It was Chi who screamed. Akwaeke was pulling her from advancing forward, fear glaring in her gaze.

"She's right. This is madness," the first chief said shakingly.

Azuka turned to him. "Do you remember how our nation fell?"

"Your position as kings is to better the state of your people not turn them into raving monsters. The past is in the past. The present is now. As king, the best way to utilize it is to..."

"As chief you play your part."

"This was not we agreed your highness."

"If you plan to oppose my words, I shall graciously open the way to join the babies." He inched his brows toward Chi daring her to continue to speak.

The first chief coughed, finding the thread on his wrapper interesting. Azuka rose soundlessly, and turned to the guards. "It would be cruel of me not to let the mothers have a chance to save their children," He addressed the Headers this time. "This is our time to rise. There shall be no humans, no tails and no borders surrounding our kingdoms. For as long as I am king, I shall make peace and grant you all your heart desires."

"Not my heart," a voice rose angrily from the crowd. It was a female voice, the hairdresser from before. She was alone as she fought her way to the front.

"I oppose as well," Chibuzor blustered barreling to the shield.

Hidden behind his eyes was a look of boredom and then he said coolly. "The heart of two opposed can never cover the heart of many."

"I refuse to stand." A chief separated himself from the other three.

"Then your children and wives might just join in the fun."

The king strode forward unminding the looks of angry and stunned expression. "The beginning starts with our hands. A new beginning. To a new beginning!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd. Some of the commoners whispered amongst themselves looking wary. But a vast majority were yelling in triumphs. This were the people the Azuka wanted to govern, power hungry people in need of bloodshed. Having Azuka as king, woke kinds of monsters within them. They knew what he could do, saw children torn before their eyes. Yet they remained unblinking, unfazed as long as they were humans, as long as they saw their red bloods raining on weeds.

I saw the guards reluctantly seize the wailing mothers. They tried to fight back, clawing at their faces with blunt nails which was of no use. I looked up sharply, when I zoned in on more humans held captive. Before I knew what was happening, more pebbles were dropped and humans thrown in them. This time, snakes occupied the second one.

Without thinking I ran to them and slammed my fists on the invisible walls. My hands bounced back, and I stumbled against the other wall which threw me backwards on the sands. I noticed the confusion on the people's faces. They must be wondering why the queen would try to save the humans. Even though I was not like them, I was one of them.

"Take her back," Azuka commanded.

Calloused hands raised me, and I fought against them. My legs battled a pair of knees and I was gifted a hard pinch on the back.

"Please Azuka. Stop this," I yelled. But it was of no use. There were no children left with the babies as the last one fell with an expansion of the walls. The others were battling with the snakes and were losing badly. They were Head snakes, not the snakes in tails.

I gripped the guard and tried to move to them. Only if I had my powers to save them and the whole of tails. I reared back to the time in the shrine, the fearful look on Azuka's face when my purple blood spilled because he had cut me. The painful slice on my abdomen was what brought me back from going down memory lane. It memory in the water became so vivid, too vivid for something that happened long ago. The Mami wata had closed off my powers with the song and possibly the water. As Okirikiri said, they were water creature known for their voices and boastful spirit. The air was fresh, breeze moving my hair wildly.

I thought about the knife I rejected. He wanted me to cut myself. He wanted me ready for the battle ahead. That meant he hadn't left me alone after all. I was wrong.

I could see that now. I could see why he opening disregarded me coldly. He knew from the onset what kind of person Azuka was, and the possibly the future. It wasn't about following the guidance of others that makes you strong and achieve goals, it was about believing you could do it on your own. Hanye wasn't here to tell me what to do and Okirikiri was not ready to go against the gods to show me the way out.

I searched for Okirikiri and he was already looking at me, a taint of smile lazed his lips. I understood now. I had to recalculate in order to stop myself from being caught. I was going to think now, for once I was going to think.

A fiery flame opened within me, and I stumped hard on squishy toes. The guard holding me shikered and released his grip. I drew the blade from his shirt, and ran to the table of palm wine. As long as it was liquid, it should do. No one noticed I had slipped from the ceremony. The guard limped towards me, closing distance with his long stride.

The song spilled from my lips, drenching myself with the bucket of palm wine. A bolt of lightning shot through me, and I felt the electricity at the tip of my fingers. Then I cut my arm. Purple blood pooled profusely from the gash, dripping scantily to my elbows.

The guard chasing looked momentarily confused. His eyes widened a fraction, stumbling backwards with ear splitting screams. Azuka narrowed his eyes and I saw his lips tremble. "Seize her now!"

The guards advanced on me. And I let the electricity surge out of me. Lightning raved the ground quickly to their steels shocking them a great deal.

"Don't let her get away," Azuka barked at the crippled guards.

"Listen. I became your queen tonight. This is not right. You heard the children's screams, you watched for yourself the brutal way he claimed the throne. Is that really the kind of king you want to rule over you?" I said. "I know some of you are against him. You came out yourself."

The silence ruling made it seem as if I spoke to thin air. They were afraid, scared of what the king might do to them if they were to go against him. I looked to the chiefs. "Help me," I pleaded but they turned away coughing. Chibuzor and Chi wouldn't even meet my eyes. Azuka's threats had left them in their weak states. He truly had the power over them.

"The king knows best," the first chief said.

"The king knows best," the others echoed.

It was a lost cause. There was no going back then. I glanced to my shoulders at Okirikiri, hoping he understood what I was going to do next. There was no getting out of here alive with someone powerful as Azuka as my foe. He was stuck now, raving fear of my purple eyes but that doesn't mean he was not going to come for me soon. Me running would never keep the human's alive.

“Then you leave me no choice.”

Panic spread through the square. Azumiri rattled her stick to the sky and claimed solace on the ground. The crowd looked wary but were surrounding me in hopes of keeping me from running. I wasn't running nor was I going to drown in tears.

“Stay back!” I advised.

I made up my mind to do it.

The guards rose freeing themselves from my lightening grip and barreled their way towards me. I raised the blade above my head. The screams of the humans receded, then came to a final stop with a babies ominous roar.

“T-take the blade away from her now.” Azuka was trying to move. Shockingly, he stretched his hands, spreading his fingers wildly. Balls of light flicked. I could feel the burn inside of me.

He was inside trying to force me drop the sword. Quickly I change the hand that cradled the sword and slashed.

No one moved, Everyone stood frozen in the square like stones they had become.

## EPILOGUE

Kamsie climbed down the pair of steep stairs, welcoming the cocoon of cheerful noises within. There were sounds of rocks knocked on walls and children running in circles. The cheerfulness was scattered by the her entrance. Heads turned, snake eyes unblinking and a dog barked.

“Good morning Kamsie,” they chorused.

I smiled. When a girl came to me, I let down the basket of fruits off my head. The others followed, attacking the contents at once. They spluttered juices on the ground, eating like the monsters they were.

The kingdom of head was long gone, so Kamsie had to move to somewhere she belonged. She realized after a while, there was no place for her in the tails. With her powers, she was different. It wasn't like before where she could pass as a human. It was like yesterday when she found out the snakes were children, so she took them in as her own; treated them as much as she could. It hadn't been easy on her, and neither on them. As she had gotten close to achieving that perfect nature, but they could still scare a human to death with their reptilian eyes and scaling skin.

The humans would have burnt them to death on sticks like they would me when they saw my marked skin. It was best she stayed with them. She heard one time from the rumors in Tails (dressed covered up), heads had been raided by thieves, most of the valuables in the palace stolen; the statues, ornaments, carved chairs, all gone.

“There were just lying there. No sign of the marked ones. It was as if they vanished,” a villager said unnoticed the orange I stole from his bunch.

At night, she cuddled with the children, each having a place on every part of my body. They grip me tight at midnight, some whimpers and other cried. Her ears rang from the ends of her city, the terrifying screams of Hanye, Tobi and the rest. It hunted her every night.

In her defense, she tried to smoothing her pain with the idea of protecting the snake children. They had no one but they have each other.

There was still something tugging in her brain. Just where was Azuka's father?