TOMI ADEYEMI

CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE

MACMILLAN



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

The Maji Clans



Ikú Clan

Maji of Life and Death

Maji title: Reaper

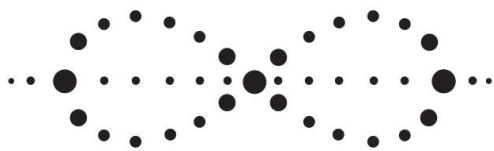
Deity: Oya

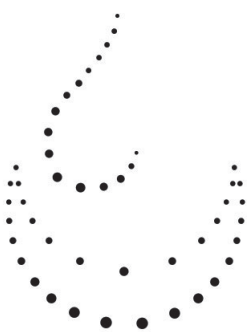
Èmí Clan

Maji of Mind, Spirit, and Dreams

Maji title: Connector

Deity: Orí





Omi Clan

Maji of Water

Maji title: Tider

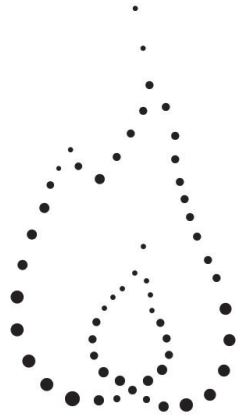
Deity: Yemọja

INÁ CLAN

MAJI OF FIRE

MAJI TITLE: BURNER

DEITY: SÀNGÓ





AFÉFÉ CLAN

MAJI OF AIR

MAJI TITLE: WINDER

DEITY: AYAO

AIYE CLAN

MAJI OF IRON AND EARTH

MAJI TITLE: GROUNDER + WELDER

DEITY: ÒGÚN



ÌMỌ́LÈ CLAN

MAJI OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT

MAJI TITLE: LIGHTER

DEITY: OCHUMARE





ÌWÒSÀN CLAN

MAJI OF HEALTH AND DISEASE

MAJI TITLE: HEALER + CANCER

DEITY: BABALÚAYÉ



ARÍRAN CLAN

MAJI OF TIME

MAJI TITLE: SEER

DEITY: ORÚNMILA



ẸRANKO CLAN

MAJI OF ANIMALS

MAJI TITLE: TAMER

DEITY: OXOSI

I try not to think of her.

But when I do, I think of rice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think about the king who took her away.

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

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

She thinks I'm going to lose.

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

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

"Zélie, do not make me repeat myself."

"But Mama—"

"Bow or leave the ring! You're wasting everyone's time."

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

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

We'll see who's giggling when I win.

"Take position."

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

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

"Commence!"

And instantly I'm on the defensive.

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

Yemi may be fast, but I can be faster.

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

I throw myself to the side, rolling across the mat as her staff smacks against its reeds. Yemi rears back to strike again as I struggle to find my footing.

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

Our staffs collide with a loud crack. The reed walls shudder. My

weapon is still reverberating from the blow when Yemi pivots to strike at my knees.

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

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

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

"Patience, Zélie," Mama Agba calls out. "It is not your time to attack. Observe. React. Wait for your opponent to strike."

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

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

And there it is.

That word.

That miserable, degrading slur.

Whispered with no regard. Wrapped in that arrogant smirk.

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

"Hey!" Though Yemi turns to Mama Agba to intervene, she doesn't have time to complain. I twirl my staff with a speed that makes her eyes widen before launching into another attack.

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

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

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

Now the real fight begins.

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

"Ugh!"

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

"Halt—"

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

I'm not done yet.

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

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

Before she can recover, I spin and thrust my staff into her stomach. I'm about to deliver the final blow when the russet sheets covering the ahéré's entrance fly open.

Bisi runs through the doorway, her white hair flying behind her. Her small chest heaves up and down as she locks eyes with Mama Agba.

"What is it?" Mama asks.

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

"Spit it out, child!"

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

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

Then the will to survive takes over.

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

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

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

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

"Zélie!" Mama Agba barks.

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

"Stay at your station," she snaps. "You need all the practice you can get."

"Mama Agba, I . . ."

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

A distraction . . .

A way to buy us time.

"I'm sorry, Mama Agba. Forgive me."

"Just get back to your station."

I bite back a smile and bow my head in apology, sweeping low enough

to survey the guards who entered. Like most soldiers in Orïsha, the shorter of the two has a complexion that matches Yemi's: brown like worn leather, framed with thick black hair. Though we're only young girls, he keeps his hand on the pommel of his sword. His grip tightens, as if at any moment one of us could strike.

The other guard stands tall, solemn and serious, much darker than his counterpart. He stays near the entrance, eyes focused on the ground. Perhaps he has the decency to feel shame for whatever it is they're about to do.

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

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

Mama Agba travels up and down the rows of girls, inspecting the work of her apprentices. Despite my nerves, I grin as she makes the guards wait, refusing to acknowledge their unwelcome presence.

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

"Tax time," the darker guard grunts. "Pay up."

Mama Agba's face drops like the heat at night. "I paid my taxes last week."

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

Of course. I grip the fabric on my mannequin so hard my fists ache.

It's not enough for the king to keep the divîners down. He has to break anyone who tries to help us.

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

That's all they'll ever see.

Mama Agba's mouth presses into a tight line. There's no way she has the coin to spare. "You already raised the divîner tax last moon," she argues. "And the moon before that."

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

"Maybe you should stop robbing us."

The words spill out of me before I can stop them. The room holds its breath. Mama Agba goes rigid, dark eyes begging me to be quiet.

"Divîners aren't making more coin. Where do you expect these new taxes to come from?" I ask. "You can't just raise the rates again and again. If you keep raising them, we can't pay!"

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

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

Majacite . . .

A weaponized alloy forged by King Saran before the Raid. Created to weaken our magic and burn through our flesh.

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

A powerful maji could fight through its influence, but the rare metal is debilitating for most of us. Though I have no magic to suppress, the

proximity of the majacite blade still pricks at my skin as the guard boxes me in.

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

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

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

Or maybe he should die.

"*You* sh—"

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

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

"Mama, don't—"

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

Coins jingle as the guard counts the bronze pieces placed into his palm. He lets out a grunt when he finishes. "It's not enough."

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

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

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

"You may not have any money." The guard digs into my back with his knee. "But you sure have your fair share of maggots." He grips my thigh with a rough hand. "I'll start with this one."

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

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

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

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

"Come on. We've got to cover the village by dusk."

Though the darker guard keeps his voice light, his jaw sets in a tight line. Maybe in our faces he sees a mother or sister, a reminder of someone he'd want to protect.

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

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

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

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

"Mama . . ."

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

Fool, she scolds me in Yoruba, the maji tongue outlawed after the

Raid. I haven't heard our language in so long, it takes me a few moments to remember what the word even means.

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

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

"I was trying to protect you."

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

I stumble, taken aback by the harshness of her words. I've never seen such disappointment in her eyes.

"If I can't fight them, why are we here?" My voice cracks, but I choke down my tears. "What's the point of training if we can't protect ourselves? Why do this if we can't protect you?"

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

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

Sooner or later they would break the people I love.

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

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

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

"Zélie asked why we are here. It's a valid question. We often talk of

how you must fight, but we never talk about why." Mama sets Bisi down and motions for Yemi to bring her a stool. "You girls have to remember that the world wasn't always like this. There was a time when everyone was on the same side."

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

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

A truth the king tried to bury with our dead.

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

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

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

thirteen, so until their powers manifested, they were called the *ibawi*, 'the divine.' "

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

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

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

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

Only the gods know why?

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

Deep down, I know the truth. I knew it the moment I saw the maji of Ibadan in chains. The gods died with our magic.

They're never coming back.

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

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

The silent memories of the Raid fill the reed hut, drenching the air with grief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alright," Mama Agba sighs. "That's enough for today. Gather your things. We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow."

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

"Mama—"

"Silence," she orders. The last of the girls give me sympathetic looks.

They rub their behinds, probably calculating how many lashes my own is about to get.

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

No. A hundred would be far too generous.

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

"Sit, Zélie."

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

I scrunch my eyebrows. "Did you poison this?"

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

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

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

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

Free of the white hair of divîners, Mama Agba could blend in with the other Orïshans, avoid the guards' torture. If she didn't associate with us, the guards might not bother her at all.

Part of me wishes she would abandon us, spare herself the pain.

With her tailoring skills, she could probably become a merchant, get her fair share of coin instead of having them all ripped away.

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

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

Few of us do.

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

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

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

"I couldn't if I tried." Not when Mama had a face like the sun.

It's that face I try to remember.

Not the corpse with blood trickling down her neck.

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

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

Mama Agba chuckles, skin crinkling around her mahogany eyes. "Just promise me you'll be careful. Promise you'll choose the right moment to fight."

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

"Good, because I have something and I don't want to regret showing it to you."

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

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

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

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

"Is this really happening?"

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

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

"Do you remember what I told you when we first started training?"

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

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

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

Pride and honor and pain swirl in my chest when Mama Agba places

the staff back into my palm. Not trusting myself to speak, I wrap my hands around her waist and inhale the familiar smell of freshly washed fabric and sweet tea.

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

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

"It's Baba."