CHAPTER ONE

ZÉLIE

I TRY NOT to think of him.

But when I do, I hear the tides.

Baba was with me the first time I heard them.

The first time I felt them.

They called out to me like a lullaby, leading us away from the forest path and toward the sea. The ocean breeze ruffled the loose coils in my hair. Rays of sun spilled through the thinning leaves.

I didn't know what we would find. What strange wonder that lullaby would hold. I just knew I had to get to it. It was like the tides held a missing piece of my soul.

When we finally saw it, my small hand slipped out of Baba's. My mouth fell open with awe. There was magic in that water.

The first magic I'd felt since the king's men killed Mama.

"*Zélie ọ̀ra o*," Baba called as I drifted toward the tides. I flinched when the seafoam washed over my toes. The lakes in Ibadan were always so cold. But that water was warm like the smell of Mama's rice. As warm as the glow of her smile. Baba followed me in and lifted his head to the sky.

It was like he could taste the sun.

In that moment he grabbed my hand; laced his bandaged fingers between mine and stared into my eyes. It was then that I knew, even if Mama was gone, we still had each other.

We could survive.

But now . . .

I open my eyes to the cold, gray sky; to the howling ocean crashing against Jimeta's rocky bluffs. I can't stay in the past.

I can't keep my father alive.

The ritual that cost Baba his life haunts me as I prepare to lay him to rest. My heart hangs with all the pain he endured; every sacrifice he made so that I could bring magic back.

"It's okay." My older brother Tzain stands by my side and offers me his hand. A shadow of a beard wraps around his dark brown skin; the new hair almost masks how tight his clenched jaw truly is.

He squeezes his palm against mine as the gentle mist transforms to a pelting rain. The downpour chills us to the bone. It's like even the gods can't help but mourn.

I'm sorry, I think to Baba's spirit, wishing I could say it to his face. As we pull on the rope keeping his casket tethered to Jimeta's rocky coast, I wonder why I thought burying one parent would prepare me to bury the next. My hands still shake with all the things left unsaid. My throat burns from the screams I force into silent tears. I try to keep it all inside as I reach for the jar filled with the last of our burial oil.

"Be careful," Tzain warns as the tremor in my hand makes drops of oil spill over the jar's rim. After three weeks of bartering to get enough to soak Baba's casket, the rippling liquid feels more precious than gold. Its sharp smell burns my nostrils as I pour the last of it onto our burial torch. Tears stream down Tzain's face when he strikes the flint. With no time to waste, I prepare the words of the *ìbùkún*—a special blessing a Reaper must pass to the dead.

"From the gods comes the gift of life," I whisper the Yoruba. *"To the gods, that gift must be returned."* The incantation sounds strange on my lips. Until a few weeks ago, no Reaper had the magic to perform an *ìbùkún* for eleven years. *"Béèni ààyé tàbí ikú kò le yà wá. Béèni ayè tàbí òrun kò le sin wá nítorí èyin lè ngbé inú ù mi. Èyin la ó máa rí—"*

The moment magic breathes under my skin, I can't find my voice. The purple light of my ashê glows around my hands, the divine power that fuels our sacred gifts. I haven't felt its heat since the ritual that brought magic back to Orïsha. Since Baba's spirit tore through my veins.

I stumble back as magic bubbles inside me. My legs go numb. Magic shackles me to my past, dragging me under despite how hard I pull—

"No!" The shout echoes against the ritual walls. My body slams into the stone floor. A thud sounds as Baba follows, stiff as a board.

I move to protect him, but his eyes are frozen open in an empty glaze. An arrowhead sticks through his chest.

Blood soaks through his ripped tunic—

"Zél, watch it!"

Tzain dives forward, reaching for the torch as it falls from my hand. He's quick, but not quick enough. The flame extinguishes the moment the torch falls into the thrashing tides.

He struggles to light the torch again, but the fire won't catch. I flinch as he chucks the useless wood into the sand.

"What're we supposed to do now?"

I hang my head, wishing I had an answer. With the kingdom in chaos, getting more oil could take weeks. Between the riots and food shortages, it's hard enough to secure a measly bag of rice.

Guilt cages me like a casket, trapping me in a tomb of my own mistakes. Maybe it's a sign I don't deserve to bury Baba.

Not when I'm the reason he's dead.

"Sorry," Tzain sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Don't be sorry." My throat closes up. "This is all my fault."

"Zél—"

"If I had never touched that scroll . . . if I'd never found out about that ritual—"

"This isn't on you," Tzain says. "Baba gave his life so you could bring magic back."

That's the problem, I hug myself. I wanted magic back to keep Baba safe. All it did was send him to an early grave. What use are these powers if I can't protect the people I love?

What good is magic if I can't bring Baba back to life?

"If you don't stop blaming yourself, you'll never stop, and I *need* you to stop." Tzain grabs both my shoulders, and in his gaze, I see the brown eyes of my father; eyes that forgive even when they shouldn't. "It's you and me now. We're all we've got."

I exhale and wipe my tears as Tzain pulls me into a hug. Even soaking wet, his embrace is still warm. He rubs his fingers up and down my spine the way Baba used to when he wrapped me in his arms.

I look back to Baba's casket floating in the ocean, waiting for a fire that will never come. "If we can't burn him—"

"Wait!" Amari calls from behind. She sprints down the iron ramp of the warship that's been our home since the sacred ritual. Her soaked, white tunic is a far cry from the ornate geles and gowns she wore when she was Orïsha's princess. It clings to her oak brown skin as she meets us at the thrashing tides.

"Here." Amari hands Tzain a rusted torch from the captain's quarters and a fresh jar of oil taken from her own meager ration.

"What about the ship?" Tzain frowns.

"We'll survive." Amari passes me the torch and my eyes linger on the new streak of white hair pasted to her cheek from the rain. A sign of the

new magic that lives in her blood. A harsh reminder of the hundreds of nobles across Orïsha who now possess streaks and magic like hers.

I turn away before she can see my pain. My stomach clenches at the constant reminder of the ritual that gave Amari her gift and the boy who broke my heart.

"Ready?" Tzain asks, and I nod although it isn't true. This time when he strikes the flint, I lower the torch to the rope. It catches in an instant.

I brace myself as the line of fire races down the rope's oil-soaked cords, shooting toward Baba's casket. My hand grips my chest the moment he goes up in flames. Reds and oranges blaze bright against the gray horizon.

"*Títí di òdí kejì*." Tzain bows his head, whispering the sacrament. I clench my teeth and do the same.

Títí di òdí kejì.

Until the other side.

Speaking the sacrament aloud brings me right back to Mama's burial. To watching her corpse go up in flames. As the prayer passes, I think of all those who might rest with her in alâfia. Everyone who died so that we could bring magic back.

Lekan, the sêntaro who sacrificed himself to awaken my gift. My friends, Zulaikha and Salim, murdered when the monarchy attacked our festival.

Mama Agba, the Seer who spent her life watching over me and the other Ilorin divîners.

Inan, the prince I believed I loved.

Títí di òdí kejì, I think to their spirits. A reminder to carry on.

Our battle isn't over.

If anything, it's just begun.

CHAPTER TWO



AMARI

Father used to say that Orïsha waits for no one.

No man.

No king.

They were the words he used to justify any action. An excuse to excuse everything.

As the flames around Baba's casket burn before me, the sword I sent through my own father's chest hangs heavy in my belt. Saran's body was never recovered from the ritual grounds.

Even if I wanted to bury him, I couldn't.

"We should go," Tzain says. "Your Mother's message will be here soon."

I trail a few steps behind him and Zélie as we leave the shore and enter the warship we stole to get to the ritual grounds. The iron ship's been our home since we brought magic back weeks ago, yet the snow leopanaires engraved along its walls still put me on edge. Every time I pass Father's old seal, I don't know whether to cry or scream. I don't know if I'm allowed to feel anything.

"All aboard!"

I glance back at the captain's high-pitched call. Families line up across the dock, handing over gold pieces as they board a small mercenary ship.

Bodies cram below the rusted deck, escaping Orïsha's borders to seek peace across foreign waters. Each sunken face sticks another needle of guilt into my heart. While I heal and lick my wounds, the entire kingdom still suffers from Father's scars.

There's no more time for me to hide. I have to take my place on Orïsha's throne. I am the only one who can usher in an era of peace. The queen who can fix everything my father broke.

Conviction warms my chest as I join the others in the frigid captain's quarters. It's one of the few rooms on the ship free of majacite: the special ore the monarchy used to burn the maji and neutralize their powers. Every comfort that once filled the room has been stripped away, traded so we could survive.

Tzain sits on the bare bed, scraping the last grains of rice from a tin cup. Zélie rests on the metal floor, half-buried in her lionaire's golden coat. The massive ryder lies across Zélie's lap, lifting her head to lick the tears that fall from Zélie's silver eyes. I force myself to look away as I reach for my own meager ration of rice.

"Here." I hand Tzain the cup.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm too nervous to eat," I say. "I'll probably just throw it all up."

It's only been a half moon since I sent word to Mother back in Lagos, but it feels like I've been waiting an eternity for her to respond. With her support, I can ascend to Orïsha's throne. I can finally right my Father's wrongs. Together we can create a land where the maji don't have to live in fear. We can unite this kingdom and erase the divisions that have plagued Orïsha for centuries.

"Don't worry." Tzain squeezes my shoulder. "No matter what she says, we'll figure it out."

He moves to check on Zélie and my chest tightens; I hate the part of me that hates what they still have. Only three weeks have passed since

Father's blade tore through my brother's gut, and I'm already starting to forget the growl in Inan's voice. Every time it happens, I have to grind my teeth to keep the heartache in. Perhaps when Mother and I are reunited, the gaping hole in my heart might actually start to heal.

"Incoming." Zélie points to the silhouette moving in the warship's dark halls. I tense as the tarnished door groans open, revealing our messenger. Roën shakes the rain from his black hair, the silky strands clumping together in waves that fall along his square jaw. With skin like desert sand and eyes like teardrops, the mercenary always looks out of place in a room full of Orïshans.

"Nailah?"

The lionaire's ears perk up as Roën kneels, removing a thick parcel from his pack. Nailah nearly knocks Roën over when he unties the binds, revealing a glistening array of fish. I'm surprised when a small smile finds its way to Zélie's lips.

"Thank you," she whispers.

Roën nods, holding her gaze. I have to clear my throat before he rises to face me.

"Let's hear it," I sigh. "What did she say?"

Roën pushes his tongue into his cheek and drops his gaze to the ground. "There was an attack. No word's gotten in or out of the capital."

"An attack?" My chest clenches as I think of Mother holed up in the palace. "How?" I rise to my feet. "When? Why?"

"They're calling themselves the *Iyika*," Roën explains. "The '*revolution*.' The maji stormed Lagos when their powers came back. Word is their attack made it all the way to the palace."

I brace myself against the wall, sliding down to the grated floor. Roën's lips keep moving, but I can't make out the words. I can't hear anything at all.

"The queen," I struggle to speak. "Did they . . . is she . . ."

"No one's heard from her since." Roën looks away. "With you hiding out here, people think the royal line's dead."

Tzain rises to his feet, but I put up a hand, forcing him to stay back. If he so much as breathes near me, I'll unravel. I'll be less than the hollow shell I already am. Every plan I made, every hope I had—in seconds, they're all gone. If Mother's dead . . .

Skies.

I really am all alone.

"What're the *Iyika* after?" Tzain asks.

"It's hard to pin down," Roën says. "Their forces are small, but lethal. They've carried out noble assassinations all over Orïsha."

"So, they're out for royal blood?" Zélie's brows knit and we lock eyes. We've barely spoken since the ritual went awry. It's nice to see she still cares about me.

"It seems that way." Roën shrugs. "But because of the *Iyika*, the military's hunting maji like dogs. Entire villages are being cleared out. The new admiral's all but declared war."

I close my eyes and run my hands through the new waves in my hair. The last time Orïsha was at war, Burners nearly wiped out the royal bloodline. Years later, Father struck back with the Raid. If war breaks out again, no one will be safe. The kingdom shall tear itself apart.

Orïsha waits for no one, Amari.

The ghost of Father's voice rings through my head. I drove my sword into his chest to free Orïsha from his tyranny, but now the kingdom's in chaos. There's no time to grieve. No time to wipe my tears. I vowed to be a better queen.

If Mother is no longer here, fulfilling that vow now falls on me.

"I'll address the public," I decide. "Take control of the kingdom. Bring back stability and end this war." I get back on my feet, pushing

my plans above my grief. "Roën, I know I'm in the red with you, but if I could just ask for a little more of your help—"

"I hope you're joking." All compassion disappears from the mercenary's tone. "You realize that no contact with your mother means you still owe me my weight in gold?"

"I gave you this ship!" I shout.

"The ship you're still squatting on?" Roën arches his brow. "The ship my men and I stole? I have families waiting to escape across the sea. This ship isn't payment. It's driving up what you owe me!"

"When I claim the throne, I'll get access to the royal treasuries," I say. "Help me set up a rally, and I'll pay you double what I owe. Just a few more days, and the gold is yours!"

"You have one night." Roën pulls up the hood on his rain cloak. "Tomorrow this ship sets sail. If you're not off it, you're going in the ocean. You lot can't afford the fare."

I intercept his path, but it doesn't stop him from blowing out the door. The grief I attempt to push down threatens to break as Roën's footsteps disappear under the trickling rain.

"We don't need him." Tzain comes to my side. "You can take the throne on your own."

"I don't have a gold piece to my name. In what world will anyone believe I have a legitimate claim?"

Tzain pauses, stumbling back as Nailah passes between our feet. Her wet nose sniffs the grated floor, searching for more fish meat. I think of the meal Roën gifted her and look to Zélie, but Zélie shakes her head.

"He already said no."

"Because *I* asked!" I nearly sprint across the room. "You convinced him to take a crew of men to a mythical island in the middle of the sea. You can persuade him to help us out with a rally."

"We already owe him gold," she says. "We're lucky enough to be leaving Jimeta with our heads!"

"Without his help, what other choice do we have?" I ask. "If Lagos fell when magic came back, Orïsha has been without a ruler for almost a moon. If I don't gain control now, I won't be able to take the throne at all!"

Zélie rubs the back of her neck, fingers passing over the new golden marks along her skin. The ancient symbols have been there since the ritual, each curved line and delicate dot shimmering like it was tattooed by the smallest needle. Though they're beautiful, Zélie covers them the same way she covers her scars. With shame.

As if the very sight of either causes her pain.

"Zélie, please." I kneel before her. "We have to try. The military's hunting maji—"

"I can't be expected to carry the plight of my people forever."

Her coldness catches me off guard, but I don't give up. "Then do it for Baba. Do it because he gave his life for this cause."

Zélie's shoulders slump and she closes her eyes, taking a deep breath. The pressure lifts in my chest when she rises to her feet.

"I'm not making any promises."

"Just try your best." I cover her hand with mine. "We've sacrificed far too much to lose this fight."