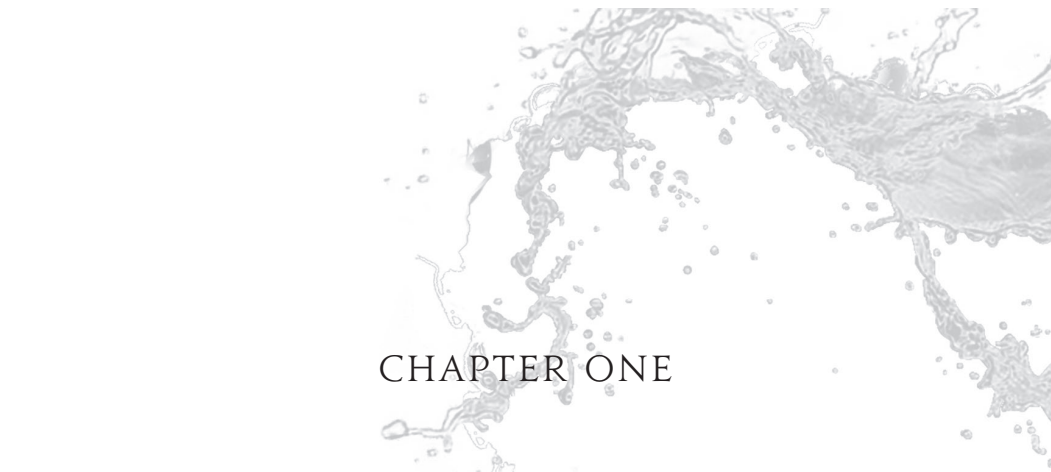




CHAPTER ONE

I CIRCLE THE ship with the sharks, slipping between dark waves. The water is layered with cold currents, sea creatures, and a ship that slices through it with cargo holds full of stolen people. I swim underneath the swells, away from the gaze of men and just out of the reach of jaws.

Waiting.

The hull of the vessel is a shadow above me, and as I follow the line of the keel, my chest tightens, hot rage building against my rib cage. I spin away as fish flit around me, stretching my fingers up toward watery sunbeams. It has been weeks since I have felt the burn of a midday sun. I miss basking in its light, letting the heat soak into my bones. Closing my eyes, I reach for a memory that twists and coils like smoke. *I'm sitting on red-brown earth under the dappled shade of a mahogany tree, splashes of sun on my hot skin.* Eagerly, I grasp for more, but as usual, the vision fades.

My stomach churns with disappointment as sharp as red coral. Every time, the loss feels the same, as if a part of me is within reach, only to dissolve like mist on the tops of the waves.

I turn in the water, a shiver of skin and coils, of hair and scales that flash like buried treasure. Embracing the current, I let trails

of seaweed run through my hands, feel the wisps of memories fade away. I pause for a moment as the shoal once again spirals around me, glittering yellow with delicate stripes of pink, letting the beauty of the fish soothe me.

Diving down, I head farther away from the ship. I know I'll need to go back, but for now I close my eyes against the velvet slip of the water, its coolness sliding along my skin. This part of the sea is darker, and I welcome being cloaked in an enfolding gloom.

Below me, an eel slinks through the depths, its muscular body only slightly blacker than the water surrounding it.

Go, I tell the creature, and in one inky slither it moves away from me. I sink deeper. Enough for the cold to seep into my bones. Enough for the glint of my tail to be swallowed by the dark.

I feel the pull of a current, and for a moment, I consider letting it take me, but then I remember the ship and I tip my face toward the surface, toward the sun and the domain of humans who breathe air. I swim up once again, my task fresh in my mind as I see the wooden hull of the ship plowing through the ocean. I'm reluctant to drift too close in case I am seen by humankind; instead I lurk in the midnight shade of the sea, the bellies of the great whites gleaming above me. They glide closer, flat obsidian eyes and teeth ready. I shudder, turning away from their large bodies as they track the ship, even though I am doing the same as they are. We both seek those that enter our domain.

As the creak of the ship echoes in the deep, I stroke the gold chain that hangs heavy around my neck, its links cold against my skin. My fingers move over the sapphire that gleams in the murk.

And then, there it is, the water crashing and hissing with the force of a body entering. Bubbles rise and pop, leaving only the

descent of splayed limbs and crimson-stained skin. I swim faster as a shark darts forward. Blood curls in the sea, red ribbons unspooling in the deep. Pushing my way upward, I try to ignore the copper tang in the water as I swim between the gray-and-white creatures.

Wait, I command them as the body sinks. They circle impatiently, black eyes flashing. I turn to the person, catching a glimpse of their unseeing eyes and an open mouth, bruised and swollen.

A woman, her skin a dark brown in the water. Black tufts of hair wave in the current, revealing more wounds on the side of her face. She spins slowly and something in the line of her body speaks to me. There was no easy death here, I think, closing my eyes briefly. But then there never is.

As I take hold of a hand the same size as mine, rage swells at the thought of another death that the sea will hide. The woman's body knocks against me as I hold her close, closer, until our hair intertwines. Cupping her chin, I look at her face and pause.

The tilt of her mouth is familiar, with generous lips framed by full cheeks. Her hair floats free from rows of the *kòlèsè* style, black tendrils that I want to touch, to neaten. I look again and a memory stirs. She reminds me of . . . I try to focus, to tease the edges of it out, but it will not come and the sharks glide closer. They will only listen to me for so long.

My gaze rakes over the woman once more, but the feeling of familiarity has passed. I let it go and remind myself that it doesn't matter. It is better this way, I think, echoing the words of Yemoja. To not remember who I was before. Leaning closer, I focus on the small glow that emanates from the woman's chest, just above her

heart. I reach for the swirl of gold that grows brighter as it breaks free from her body. When my fingertips touch the essence, I close my eyes in preparation.

“Mo gbà yín. Ní àpéjọ, ìwọ yóò rí ìbùkún nípasẹ̀ Ìyá Yemoja tí yóo ẹ̀ ìròrùn ìrìn àjò rẹ. Kí Olodumare mú ọ̀ dé ilé ní àlélúwú àti àláfíà,” I say, and then repeat the prayer that will glean the woman’s soul. “I welcome you. Gathered, you will be blessed by Mother Yemoja, who will ease your journey. May Olodumare take you home to safety and peace. Come forth.”

The warmth of the woman’s life floods my mind. I see her as a child, laughing when she winds her arms around the neck of her mother. Then she’s older, eyes alight with a different kind of love as she holds out a bowl of rice and peppered catfish. With shining dark skin and a wide smile, the man before her is beautiful. I feel her heart lift as he takes the food and their fingers brush. Later, she’s tilling a small field next to a village. Fingers sprinkling seeds into the grooves she’s created in the earth, as she sings a song to Oko, the orisa of crops. Her voice is sweet and high, rising with the heat of the day. And then she’s holding a baby with the same grin as hers. She presses her face into the folds of the girl’s neck, inhaling the child’s milky scent. I smile, feeling all the jubilation she has felt and the love that fills her soul.

When I open my eyes, the woman’s essence hovers in the cradle of my fingers. I focus on the joy in her memories as I coax forth her soul, guiding it toward the sapphire of my necklace. The stone absorbs her essence, growing warm against the hollow of my throat. I hold the images of the woman’s life in my mind and wonder if the village she came from still stands. If her people continue to wait for her, checking the horizon every day to see if she will return.

Tatters of her wrapper drift in the water, a faded orange that was once as bright as the midafternoon sun. I look down at the hand still in mine, with its torn pale nails and jagged scars. She will receive Yemoja's blessing before she returns to Olodumare; it is the one thing I am able to do for her.

May you be at peace, sister. Yemoja will ease your journey back home.

Releasing the woman's fingers, I turn away, not watching as her body sinks into the depths.

A daughter, a wife, a mother.

My tears join the salt of the sea.

...

Yemoja can only be summoned on the seventh day, but I swim to her island the afternoon before. A small outcropping of sand, rock, and tufts of trees, it will afford me a brief rest from the sea and all it swallows. I still like to feel the sun on my legs, on my hair, to sleep and dream sometimes.

A flick of a caudal fin stops me as I get closer to the island. I pause, the sapphire in my necklace glowing gently to let me know that another of my kind is close.

"Simidele." The voice is like a vine, snaking through the water and teasing out the hint of a smile from me.

I turn, sweeping my arms through the water in arcs, taking in the deep purple scales and round face of Folasade. Remade by Yemoja when the first people were stolen early this year, Folasade is small, but her smile is large, her eyes reflecting every feeling that ripples through her.

"It is good to see you, Simidele," she says, pressing her hand

against her chest as the fans of our tails touch gently in the water, scales glinting. “Although your search does not usually include this part of the sea.”

I mirror her welcoming gesture before cupping my jewel gently. “I know. I’m returning with a soul to be blessed.”

Folasade nods, her short curls in a soft, round black halo. “Praise Yemoja for her unbounded love.” She touches the matching sapphire at her throat and then cocks her head to one side, peering at me closely. “What is the matter? You look . . . not yourself.”

“It’s just . . .” But the words won’t come and instead I find myself saying nothing, trying to keep my lips from trembling. The sapphire is cool in my grip as I look down at it, remembering the woman.

Folasade floats nearer as my hair waves in front of us. “May I?” she asks.

Nodding, I let Folasade sweep my curls away so that we can see each other’s faces clearly. Her eyes are almost black in the water, but they shine with a reverence I know is missing from mine.

“I know you find this hard, Simidele.” Folasade pauses, thinking carefully before speaking again. “But gathering the souls of those who pass in the sea is a way to honor them and bless their journey back to our Creator, Olodumare.” She nods in encouragement, her smile beatific. “It is important to focus on this and not be distracted by other doubts.”

“Yes,” I say, but my eyes don’t meet Folasade’s and there are still echoes of grief in me.

“Where are you heading to now? It is not the seventh day, you can’t summon Yemoja yet.”

“I know, but I’m going to her island. To—” I stop myself, knowing what Folasade will say, what she has said to me before.

“You are going to change. To lie on the sand and mull over memories of your life before. Why must you keep doing this, Simidele? It has been three months since you have been remade.”

“I like to feel . . . like myself.” I try to keep the petulance out of my tone, but I know it is still there. None of the other six Mami Wata change unless they have to.

“You mean, you like to pretend you are still human,” says Folasade, her mouth pursed.

I stay silent, glancing up at the watery sunlight. I’m still craving the heat of it on my skin and the way it will settle deep into my bones.

“But you are not a girl anymore.” Folasade grips my shoulder, forcing my gaze to hers. “You are more than that. We are more than that. Gathering souls to bless is what we were created to do. It is easier to leave who you were behind. Rejoice in that, sister. Let the sea swallow your memories, and embrace what you are now.”

I lift my chin and nod. I think of the woman again, of her memories, her family. Folasade is right.

“I only remind you of this to make it easier. The others all agree, Simidele.” She holds me closer before releasing me, floating backward, melting into the darkness. “Let your past go.”

Folasade’s faith in Yemoja, in our task, should inspire me. I should let myself sink down, let the depths soothe me until it is time to summon Yemoja.

But I don’t. I can’t. I wait until I can no longer see the purple of her scales or the black of her hair, and then I look up at the sun that pierces the surface. With a push from my tail, I propel myself toward the light.

My head splits the gentle waves of the sea, revealing the island. I swim to the beach, pull myself carefully across the shallows, and lie on the sand, letting the sun dry me. Two legs split from the curve of my tail as the gold-and-dusty-pink scales elongate, growing into a wrapper that tucks around my body. Small feet complete my human form, a dark brown that matches the rest of my skin.

I blink against the bright clean of the day, thinking about the woman I found in the water. There was something about her that makes me think of wrappers spun with gold and the taste of yams, of rich voices echoing in the night.

I spread my hair over the white of the beach and close my eyes. With the sun burning my skin and my hands grasping fistfuls of sand, I let myself dream in a way I never can in the sea.

I run my fingers over the uneven walls of my home, warm from the heat of the day. The floor is freshly swept, and as I walk outside, the red sun sets the rest of the city on fire. I can see no one, but I can hear the voices that drift on the cooler breeze of the evening and I know where everyone will be.

I weave through the neat streets, feeling the contentment that comes with safety. The city is cocooned by forest, set out in concentric spirals that begin with the Aláàfin's palace and end with the great wall that encircles it all. When I reach the outer compound, I am greeted with the sight of the people. Most are seated around the smaller fires or gathered in groups, talking and laughing before the storyteller begins the tales of the day.

My age mates gather around the mahogany tree in the main meeting space. The girls with their hair in *ìpàkó ẹlédè* style, flicking the ends of their braids off their shiny foreheads while boys crouch

around games of Ayòayò. All dazzle in wrappers of yellow, indigo, and red. Elders sit closer to the fire, most of them clutching dried papaya and fried plantain, late-night snacks offered by the Alààfin's market that fill the air with spice. It is only as I venture farther into the crowd, closer to the seventeenth gate, that I see my mother. She's standing against the tree, backlit by the fire. Her wrapper is midnight blue with stars picked out in silver and gold, repeating patterns that sparkle in the last rays of the day. As the principal storyteller, she will tell a story about Olodumare tonight. She always wears that outfit when speaking about the Creator, telling me that the fabric reminds people of when the world was made.

She spots me weaving through the crowd and greets me with a huge smile, cheeks full over a large mouth, her brown eyes wide-set, the same as mine. "What is it, Simidele? Is there a stain?" She cranes her head, twisting to check the sides and back of her wrapper.

"No. You look beautiful, ìyá."

She walks to me, lifting both hands so that she can cradle my face. "And so do you, ọmọbìnrin ìn mi." Releasing me, my mother twirls away before throwing a look over her shoulder. "Are you staying for my performance this evening?"

I nod and she smiles again, dimples puckering the smoothness of her cheeks, a beauty mark next to the corner of her mouth. I watch as she settles down in front of the crowd, clasping her hands together and lifting her chin.

"Here is a story. Story it is . . ."

...

There are curls across the sky and salt in my mouth when I wake on the seventh day.

My mother.

The woman whose soul I gathered looked just like her.

Hair slides from my face as I blink into the hazy pink dawn, my mother's features stamped upon my mind. On land, the memory does not snake away from me, and I hold it close, remembering the split of her smile and the dimples that would crinkle on either cheek when she laughed.

My mother.

In front of me stretches the sea, thick with waves. I sit up, smiling into the bones of my knees, happy at remembering her, if only for a while. I wipe the sheen of sweat from my face and look out to the open water where the sky is hanging low, clouds scraping the tips of the waves. I could stand, if I wanted. But I don't. Instead, I close my eyes, hold out a hand, and trace the curve of my mother's imagined cheek, the quirk of her lips. The giddiness of remembering almost makes me forget what I am here for.

But the sea reminds me, and the surge and crash of giant swells bring me back. I take a deep breath, tuck the memory away, and hope that it stays. Hope that, when I am back in the water, I can still recall her face. Hope that the sea will not erase this, even though it always does.