

RAYBEARER



RAYBEARER



JORDAN
IFUEKO



HOT
KEY 
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

Text copyright © Jordan Ifueko, 2020

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Jordan Ifueko to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0927-1

Also available as an ebook and audiobook

1

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

*For the kid scanning fairy tales
for a hero with a face like theirs.*

*And for the girls whose stories
we compressed into pities and wonders,
triumphs and cautions, without asking,
even once, for their names.*

OBASI
OCEAN

MEWE

NONTES

BLESSID

NYAMBA

OLUWAN

SWANA

SPARTI

QUETZALA





GYEOLJEONG
SEA

BIRASLOV

VALLEY

JINHWA
PASS

SONGLAND

MOREYAO

DJBANTI

DHYRMA

DENGGA SEA



CHAPTER 1

I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED THAT fairies exist.

When elephants passed by in a lumbering sea beneath my window, flecks of light whispered in the dust, dancing above the rows of tusks and leather. I leaned precariously over the sill, hoping to catch a fleck before a servant wrestled me inside.

“Shame-shame, Tarisai,” my tutors fretted. “What would The Lady do if you fell?”

“But I want to see the lights,” I said.

“They’re only *tutsu* sprites.” A tutor herded me away from the window. “Kind spirits. They guide lost elephants to watering holes.”

“Or to lion packs,” another tutor muttered. “If they’re feeling less kind.”

Magic, I soon learned, was capricious. When I squinted at the swollen trunk of our courtyard boob tree, a cheeky face appeared. *Kye, kye, killer-girl*, it snickered before vanishing into the bark.

I was seven when the man with cobalt-fire wings found me. That night, I had decided to search Swana, the second-largest realm in the Arit empire, for my mother. I had crept past my snoring maids and tutors, stuffed a sack with mangoes, and scaled our mudbrick wall.

The moon hung high above the savannah when the *alagbato*, the fairy, appeared in my path. The light glinted in his gold-flecked eyes, which slanted all the way to his dark temples. He seized the back of my garment, hoisting me up for examination. I wore a wrapper the color of banana leaves wound several times beneath my arms, leaving my shoulders bare. The *alagbato* watched me, amused, as I punched and kicked the air.

I'm in bed at Bhekina House, I told myself. My heart pounded like a fist on a goatskin drum. I bit my cheek to prove I was dreaming. I'm wrapped in gauzy mosquito nets and the servants are fanning me with palm fronds. I can smell breakfast in the kitchens. Maize porridge. Stewed matemba fish . . .

But my cheek began to throb. I was not in bed. I was lost in the balmy Swanian grasslands, and this man was made of flames.

“Hello, Tarisai.” His Sahara breath warmed my beaded braids. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

“How do you know my name?” I demanded. Were *alagbatos* all-knowing, like Am the Storyteller?

“I am the one who gave it to you.”

I was too angry to absorb this reply. Did he have to

be so *bright*? Even his hair shimmered, a luminous thicket around his narrow face. If our compound guards spotted him . . .

I sighed. I had barely made it a mile into the savannah. Capture now would be humiliating. My tutors would lock me up again—and this time, *every* window in Bhekina House would be nailed shut.

“I’m not allowed to be touched,” I snapped, clawing at the alagbato’s grip. His skin felt smooth and hot, like clay left to harden in the sun.

“Not allowed? You are small enough to be carried. I am told human children need affection.”

“Well, I’m not human,” I shot back in triumph. “So put me down.”

“Who told you that, little girl?”

“No one,” I admitted after a pause. “But they all say it behind my back. I’m not like other children.”

This was possibly a lie. The truth was, I’d never *seen* other children, except in the market caravans that passed Bhekina House from a distance. I would wave from my window until my arms grew sore, but they never waved back. The children would stare straight past me, as if our compound—manor, orchard, and houses enough to make a small village—were invisible to anyone outside.

“Yes,” the alagbato agreed grimly. “You are different. Would you like to see your mother, Tarisai?”

I stopped resisting at once, and my limbs hung limp as vines. “Do you know where she is?”

My mother was like morning mist: here, then gone, vanished in clouds of jasmine. My tutors bowed superstitiously whenever they passed her wood carving in my study. They called her *The Lady*. I delighted in our resemblance: the same high cheekbones, full lips, and fathomless black eyes. Her carving watched as my study brimmed with scholars from sun-up to moonrise.

They chattered in dialects from all twelve realms of the Arit empire. Some faces were warm and dark, like mine and The Lady's. Others were pale as goat's milk with eyes like water, or russet and smelling of cardamom, or golden with hair that flowed like ink. The tutors plied me with riddles, shoving diagrams into my hands.

Can she solve it? Try a different one. She'll have to do better than that.

I didn't know what they were looking for. I only knew that once they found it, I would get to see The Lady again.

This will be the day, the tutors gushed when I excelled at my lessons. *The Lady will be so pleased*. Then the palisade gates of Bhekina House opened, and my mother glided inside, detached as a star. Her shoulders glowed like embers. Wax-dyed cloth clung to her torso like a second skin, patterns zigzagging in red, gold, and black. She held me to her breast, a feeling so lovely I wept as she sang: *Me, mine, she's me and she is mine*.

The Lady never spoke when I demonstrated my skills. Sometimes she nodded as if to say, *Yes, perhaps*. But in the end, she always shook her head.

No. Not enough.

I recited poems in eight different languages, hurled darts into miniscule targets, solved giant logic puzzles on the floor. But each time it was no, no, and no again. Then she vanished in that haze of heady perfume.

At age five I had begun to sleepwalk, padding barefoot through the smooth plaster halls of our manor. I would peer in each room, walking and whimpering for my mother until a servant carried me back to bed.

They were always careful never to touch my skin.

“I cannot find your mother,” the alagbato told me the night of my attempted escape. “But I can show you a memory. Not in my head.” He dodged my attempt to seize his face. “I never store secrets on my person.”

The Lady had forbidden people from touching me for a reason. I could steal the story of almost anything: a comb, a spear, a person. I touched something and knew where it had been a moment before. I saw with their eyes, if they had eyes; sighed with their lungs; felt what their hearts had suffered. If I held on long enough, I could see a person’s memories for months, even years.

Only The Lady was immune to my gift. I knew every story in Bhékina House, except hers.

“You will have to take my memory from the place where it happened,” said the alagbato, setting me lightly in the tall grass. “Come. It is not far.”

He offered a bony hand, but I hesitated. “You’re a stranger,” I said.

“Are you sure?” he asked, and I felt the odd sensation of peering into a mirror. He smiled, lips pursed like a meerkat’s. “If it makes you feel any better, my name is Melu. And thanks to *that woman*, I am not an alagbato.” His smile soured into a grimace. “Not anymore.”

Fear rose in my belly like smoke from a coal pit, but I silenced my worries. *Do you want to find The Lady or not?*

I picked up my sack, from which most of the mangoes had fallen, and took Melu’s hand. Though gentle, his grip felt hard around mine, as though his muscles were made of bronze. An emerald-studded cuff glinted on his forearm, and when I grazed the cuff by accident, it seared me.

“Careful,” he murmured.

We walked to a clearing hedged in acacia trees. Herons flapped above a vast, still pool. The air hung with lilies and violets, and the brush rustled and *shhhed* in a wordless lullaby.

“Is this where you live?” I asked in awe.

“In a manner of speaking,” he said. “It was beautiful for the first few thousand days. After that, it grew tedious.” I blinked up at him in confusion, but he did not explain. He only pointed to the soft red earth. “The story is here.”

Cautiously, I pressed my ear to the ground. I’d never tried to take the memory of any place larger than my bedroom. A familiar heat flushed my face and hands as my mind stole into the dirt, latching onto whatever memory was strongest. The winged man and the flock of herons disappeared.



The clearing is younger now, with fewer brush and acacia trees. It is daytime in this memory, and the amber pool is clear, free of fish and mayflies. My heart skips a beat: The Lady, my Lady, reclines on a rock by the water.

The sun makes a mosaic of her reflection on the pool's surface, distorting her face, rippling her cloud of midnight hair. Her wrapper is frayed, and her sandals are worn to the soles. I worry, wondering: *What were you running from, Mother?*

The Lady dips an emerald cuff into the water. She murmurs over the jewel, kissing it tenderly, and the emerald glows and fades. Then she sets the cuff down and calls out, "Melu." My mother tastes the word on her full lips, drawing out the syllables like a song. "Melu, my dear. Won't you come out and play?"

The clearing is silent. The Lady laughs, a deep, throaty sound. "The seers say that alagbatos dislike humans. Some doubt you even exist, Great Melu, guardian of Swana. But I think you do hear." She produces a green vial from her pocket and tips it precariously toward the pool. "I think you hear just fine."

A hot wind rushes into the clearing, swirling up dirt and clay into a tall, lean man. His wings smolder cobalt blue, like a young fire, but his voice is frost cold. "Stop."

"I would tell you my name," The Lady tells him.

“But as you know, my father never gave me one.” She pauses, still dangling that vial over the pool. “How quickly does *abiku* blood spread through earth and water, Melu? How much would poison every living thing within a fifty-mile radius? Two drops? Three?”

“Don’t,” Melu barks. “Wait.”

The Lady points to the emerald cuff.

Melu’s features contort with defeat. Stone-jawed, he picks up the cuff and snaps it on his forearm.

“If I’ve done that right,” says The Lady, “you are no longer Swana’s alagbato. You are my ehru . . . my djinn.”

“Three wishes,” Melu spits. “And I am bound to this grassland until your wishes are complete.”

“How convenient.” The Lady sits, thoughtfully dangling her muscular brown legs in the water. “Melu, I wish for a stronghold that no one may see or hear unless I desire it. A place my friends and I will always be safe. A place . . . befitting royalty. That is my first command.”

Melu blinks. “It is done.”

“Where?”

“A mile from here.” Melu points, and the newly blossomed plaster walls of Bhekina House shimmer in the distance.

The Lady glows with pleasure. “Now,” she breathes, “I wish for Olugbade’s death—”

“Not allowed,” Melu snaps. “Life and death are beyond my power. *Especially* that life. Even fairies may not kill a Raybearer.”

The Lady's mouth hardens, then relaxes. "I thought that might be the case," she says. "Fine. I wish for a child who will do, think, and feel as I tell it. An extension of myself. A gifted child, sure to stand out in a contest of talent. This is my second command."

"Not allowed," Melu intones again. "I cannot force a human to love or hate. You may not *own* a child as you own an ehru."

"Can't I?" The Lady steeples her fingers in thought. A smile spreads across her face, and her teeth are coldly white.

"What if," she says, "my child *was* an ehru? What if my child was yours?"

Melu grows as rigid as a tree in dry season. "Such a union would go against nature. You are human, not of my kind. You ask for an abomination."

"Oh no, Melu." The Lady's brilliant black eyes dance over the ehru's horrified ones. "I command that abomination."



They performed a ritual then, one I didn't understand at seven years old. It looked painful, the way his body folded over hers in the grass. Two species never meant to unite, dissimilar as flesh against metal. But the memory told me that nine months later, my infant cries rang through Bhekina House. And The Lady's third ungranted wish—her abomination—ran through my veins.



“Do you understand now?” Melu muttered over my drowsy form, once the memory had run its course. “Until you grant her third wish, neither you nor I will be free.” He touched my forehead with a long, slender finger. “I bargained with The Lady for the privilege of naming you Tarisai. It is a Swana name: *behold what is coming*. Your soul is hers for now. But your name, I insisted, must be your own.”

He sounded far away. Stealing The Lady’s story had exhausted me. I barely sensed Melu cradle me in his narrow arms, soar through the night, and deposit me back at the palisade gates of Bhekina House. He whispered, “I’ve been bound to this savannah for seven years. For my sake, I hope that woman claims her wish. But for your sake, daughter, I hope that day never comes.” Then servants clambered toward the gates, and Melu was gone.

A dozen anxious hands put me to bed, and syrupy voices soothed me when I babbled about Melu the next day. *It was all a dream*, the tutors said. But their dilated pupils and terse smiles told a different story. My adventure had confirmed their most sinister suspicions.

My mother was the devil, and I, her puppet demon.



CHAPTER 2

THE SWANA GRASSLANDS WERE WARM EVEN in the rainy season. But the air around me always chilled. As birthdays passed—eight, nine, ten—I shivered through Bhekina House, coddled by servants who never broke the surface of my bubble. Sometimes I longed for human touch so much, I would bend my cheek to open flames. The tendrils would sear my skin, but I would smile, pretending to feel The Lady’s fingers.

Eventually, I fell in the kitchen firepit by accident. The servants dragged me out, sobbing, shrieking prayers to Am the Storyteller. I shook all over and rasped, “*I can’t die, I can’t die, Mother’s going to come back, so I can’t die.*”

But I had not burned. My clothes hung in ruined smolders, but my coily black hair had not even singed.

As my maids looked on in shock, I remembered the wording from The Lady’s wish for Bhekina House: *a place my friends and I will always be safe.*

“It’s Mother,” I said breathlessly. “She protected me.”

From that day on, I multiplied the gray hairs of my

servants by jumping off walls, submerging my head in buckets of water, and catching venomous spiders, encouraging them to bite.

“I didn’t die,” I would laugh as the servants set my broken bones and poured antidotal teas down my throat.

“Yes,” a nursemaid would say through gritted teeth. “That’s because we reached you in time.”

“No,” I would insist dreamily. “It’s because my mother loves me.”

My tutors grew more relentless. The sooner they could make me into what The Lady wanted, after all, the sooner they would be rid of me. So the lessons continued, lectures droning in my ears like gadflies. Ink fumes stung my nose each day, and the scent of jasmine haunted me each night. But Melu’s memory had awoken a hunger inside me, one the mango orchards of Bhekina House could not satiate. I dreamed and lusted for the world beyond the gate.

An enormous globe rested on a wooden stand in my study. Jagged continents curved around a deep blue ocean I had never seen. The largest continent, which included Swana, was a patchwork of savannahs, forests, deserts, and snowy tundras. This was Aritsar, my tutors said. *The Deathless Arit empire, may Kunleo live forever.*

Most of the history scrolls in my study were edited. My tutors would blot out lines and sometimes whole pages with black ink, refusing to tell me why. Once, I managed to hold papers to the light, reading several paragraphs before a tutor snatched them away.

Long ago, the papers said, Aritsar had not existed. In its place, a jumble of isolated islands had floated on a vast sea. The twelve weak, rivaling lands were ravaged by abiku: demons from the Underworld. Then a warlord named Enoba “the Perfect” Kunleo had unleashed a power from the earth, uniting the lands into one massive continent. He had crowned himself emperor, enlisting twelve of the continent’s rulers as his vassals. Then he battled the abiku with his newly christened Army of Twelve Realms. The mortal and immortal armies had been so evenly matched that Enoba’s war dragged on for decades before, at last, the exhausted forces struck a truce.

Enoba was celebrated as Aritsar’s savior. The continent rulers credited him for bringing peace, and so, for centuries, his line had ruled Aritsar from their home realm of Oluwan, uniting twelve cultures in a network of art, science, and trade. Whenever caravans passed by Bhekina House, I heard merchant families singing of the empire, rocking infants on their hips as children skipped across the savannah:

Oluwan and Swana bring his drum; nse, nse
Dhyrma and Nyamba bring his plow; gpopo, gpopo
Mewe and Sparti see our older brother dance—
Black and gold, isn’t he perfect!

Quetzala sharpens his spear; nse, nse
Blessid Valley weaves his wrapper; gpopo, gpopo
Nontes and Biraslov see our older brother dance!
Black and gold, isn't he perfect?

Djbanti braids his hair; nse, nse
Moreyao brings his gourd; gpopo, gpopo
Eleven moons watch our older brother dance:
Black and gold, isn't he perfect?

Aritsar's current *older brother*, or emperor, was Olugbade Kunleo: a direct descendant of Enoba the Perfect. I used to croon the patriotic anthem in our mango orchards. As I wove between branches, I would talk to an invisible emperor, sharing my thoughts on Arit history and governance. Sometimes I imagined him gazing down like the sun through the clouds, warming my bare shoulders with approval. How perfect he must be, to unite so many lands!

Dhyrma. Nontes. Djbanti. The names of the Arit realms tasted spicy on my tongue. My bones ached for those far places, described by my tutors in rainbow colors: *The silk farms of Moreyao. The night festivals of Nyamba. The snowy peaks of Biraslov, the booby-trapped rainforests of Quetzala.* I lay on my back, gazing up at the mango trees, trying to imagine the high-rises of Oluwan City: the seat of our divine emperor. Even Swana held its mystery. I had never left our grassland, but heard tales of lush cacao fields,

and markets where women hawked candied papaya from baskets on their heads.

But more than cities and rainforests, I craved voices that would not call me *demon*.

I envied the children who passed by Bhekina House, with their grandparents who jostled them on their knees, their siblings who chased and teased them. The Lady was the only person in the world who touched me willingly.

One morning, as I watched the caravans from my study window, I learned another song.

*Eleven danced around the throne,
Eleven moons in glory shone,
They shone around the sun.*

*But traitors rise and empires fall,
And Sun-Ray-Sun will rule them all,
When all is said-o, all is said
And done-heh, done-heh, done.*

I liked the ominous rhyme. I whispered it around the manor like an incantation until a tutor overheard me. She asked, voice quavering, where I had heard such nonsense. I told her . . . and the next day, every window in my study was nailed shut.

I pried at the wooden slats until my small fingers were scratched and torn. That glimpse of the outside had been my lifeline. My portal to Aritsar—to feeling less alone.

How dare they make my windows vanish? As The Lady had vanished, and Melu, and everything else I longed for?

I threatened to set the study aflame. “I’ll do it,” I howled at the servants. “Why not? I won’t burn. But your scrolls will. *You* will.”

My tutors had blanched. “There are things we simply can’t teach you,” they said, looking hunted as they bound my bloodied hands. “It is forbidden.” Like The Lady, my tutors had a habit of disappearing for months. This usually occurred after one of The Lady’s visits, when she found my learning to be unsatisfactory. Then new, nervous faces would replace the old ones.

On my eleventh birthday, two such faces arrived at Bhékina House, and accompanying them was the only birthday present I wanted.

“Mother!” I cried, launching myself at her. The Lady wore a richly patterned wax-dyed wrapper, which scratched my cheek as I clung to her. She cupped my face, a feeling so wonderful I shivered.

“Hello, Made-of-Me,” she said, and hummed that chilling lullaby: *Me, mine, she’s me and she is mine.*

We stood in Bhékina House’s open-air great hall. Sunlight streamed from our chicken-scattered courtyard, glowing across the hall’s clay tiles and illuminating The Lady’s black cloud of hair. The two strangers flanked her, standing so close to The Lady, I was jealous.

“Friends,” The Lady said, “please tell my daughter

that you are her new, permanent guardians.” She seldom addressed me directly. When she did, her words were sparse and halting. I would later realize she was afraid of commanding me by accident—afraid of wasting her third precious wish, which still lay dormant inside me.

The word *permanent* piqued my interest. I had never kept a servant for more than a few months. The older stranger, a feline woman about The Lady’s age, was dressed entirely in green. Tawny brown skin contrasted with hard green eyes. Curly hair burst from beneath her cloak’s hood, which she wore even in the heat. An *isoken*, I realized. Isoken people had mixed blood, parents from different Arit realms. To hasten empire unity, the Kunleo imperial treasury rewarded families for every isoken child born.

“I’m Kathleen,” the woman sighed at me, then turned back to The Lady. “I hope this creature won’t be trouble. Does it have a name besides Made-of-You?”

“The ehru calls her something else,” The Lady said.

I had been trained to recognize accents. Kathleen’s lisp echoed her home realm, Mewe: a land of green, craggy hills in the distant northern fingers of Aritsar.

“My name is Tarisai,” I piped up, and greeted Kathleen in Mewish, hoping to impress. “May your autumn leaves grow back green!” I didn’t know what autumn was, and had never lived in a place where trees changed color, but it sounded like a nice thing to say.

“Am’s Story, Lady,” the isoken woman snorted. “Did

you teach the kid *all twelve* realm tongues?”

“No harm in outshining the competition,” The Lady said smugly.

“They don’t test children on different languages,” Kathleen retorted. “Not anymore. Every realm speaks Arit now. That’s the point of being an empire.”

“Only Arit citizens,” droned the second stranger, “take pride in their cultures being erased. Why be unique, when you could all be the same?” He looked much younger than Kathleen—perhaps twenty, and more boy than man. His voice reminded me of a spider’s web, soft and gossamer. I could not place his accent anywhere in Aritsar.

He scanned me with eyes like half-moons, lifting a tan, angular jaw. A blue cape draped over his arm. Besides that, he wore nothing but trousers, and every inch of his body—face, arms, chest, and feet—was covered in what appeared to be geometric purple tattoos. I probably imagined it, but for a moment, they seemed to glow.

He gave a sardonic bow, straight jet hair shining over his shoulder. “A pleasure, Lady’s Daughter. My name is Woo In. My homeland, thank the Storyteller, lies outside this unnaturally unified empire.”

I gaped. “You’re from Songland!”

“You make it sound like a fairy world.” He rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m from Songland. I’m covered in these pretty pictures, aren’t I?”

His tone was sarcastic. But I *did* think they were pretty, if a little unsettling. Patterns twisted up his face and neck,

like a logic puzzle with no solution. I gulped: Woo In was a Redemptor.

Songland was a poor peninsula nation on the edge of our continent. Their ancestors had refused to recognize Enoba as emperor—and as a result, the tiny realm was excluded from Aritsar’s bustling trade. A jagged range of mountains cut Songland off from the mainland. Aritsar might have ignored Songland altogether, if not for the Redemptors.

Enoba the Perfect had bought peace for our world at a steep price. Every year, three hundred children were sent into the Oruku Breach: the last known entrance to the Underworld. In exchange for this sacrifice, the abiku refrained from ravaging human cities and villages. The children, known as Redemptors, were born with maps on their skin, meant to guide them through the Underworld and back to the realm of the living. Few survived the journey. As a result, some families hid their Redemptor children at birth. But for every missed sacrifice, the abiku would send a horde of beasts and plagues to raze the continent.

Redemptors were supposedly born at random, to any race and class. But for some reason, every Redemptor in the last five hundred years had been born in Songland.

No one knew why. But guilt-ridden Arits, relieved from the burden of sacrificing their own children, had plenty of theories to help them sleep at night. The Songlanders had offended the Storyteller, they guessed. The Redemptor children were punishment for some

historical sin of Songland's. Or perhaps, Songland was *blessed* by the Storyteller, and their children were saints, chosen to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. The greater good, of course, was Aritsar.

I peered at Woo In. He did not strike me as particularly saintly. But he must have been special to survive the Oruku Breach. In the rare event that Redemptor children came back alive, they were scarred in mind, if not body.

I smiled at him and Kathleen. Maybe if these strangers—my *permanent guardians*—liked me, then I could stop talking to invisible emperors. Maybe, for the first time, I could have friends. Real ones.

Don't think I'm a demon, I prayed. Think I'm a girl. A normal, market-caravan, not-scary girl.

"Do we *have* to nanny her?" Kathleen whined to The Lady. "Can't you hire some mute nursemaid, or bribe one into secrecy?"

"No," The Lady snapped. "Once my daughter leaves Bhekina House for Oluwan City, I cannot control what she sees and hears. She must be with people I trust."

Leave?

Leave Bhekina House?

Kathleen crossed her arms. "You're sure this . . . wish-creature is ready?"

"We are running out of time. Children are already being chosen. If we are not quick, there will be no more room on the Prince's Council—" The Lady broke off abruptly, tossing me a nervous glance.

“Don’t fret, Lady,” said Kathleen with a smirk. “We can always *make* room.”

The Lady frowned. “I’m hoping that won’t be necessary. The emperor and his Elev—” She stopped again, glancing at me. “The emperor’s . . . friends . . . are too smart for that. My daughter’s selection must happen as naturally as possible.”

Kathleen laughed. “Do we have to keep censoring what we say? She’s going to find out eventually.”

“Ignorance will make her seem pure,” The Lady said grimly. “The emperor loves girls like that.”

“Then you’re making the wish today?” Woo In asked. The Lady nodded, and to my shock, she cupped Woo In’s face just as she had cupped mine. He leaned into the touch, kissing her palm. I was jealous immediately.

She said, “I know you’ll keep her safe.”

He scanned her features with hunger, a moth before a candle. “I believe in this cause,” he said.

She fondled his hair. “And I believe in you.”

“Why are we going to Oluwan?” I demanded. “Mother, are you coming too?”

“No, Made-of-Me.” The Lady reclined on one of our hall’s broad window seats. The sun backlit her frame in a halo. “I will come for you when the time is right.” She patted her lap, nodding at me.

For the rest of my life, I wished the universe had given me a sign then. A warning of what was about to happen. But no—the air was warm and serene, and honeybirds sang

in the distance as I scrambled, eagerly, into my mother's arms.

She stroked my back for a moment, gazing at the hazy Swanian sky. "How frightened you must be," she told someone I could not see. "You caged me like a bird, but you could not make me sing." Then she told Kathleen, "Give her the portrait."

A gilded oval frame was placed in my hands. A boy stared back at me, with tightly curled hair and the brightest smile I'd ever seen. Naïve brown eyes shone from a dark, broad-featured face.

"Why is he happy?" I asked.

The Lady raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you curious who he is?" I shrugged, and so she answered my question. "He is happy because he has everything you want. Power. Wealth. Legacy. His father stole those things from you, and gave them to him."

"Be careful, Lady," Kathleen muttered. "Remember: She must fall in love with him."

My brow creased with confusion. I couldn't remember ever wanting power or wealth. And why did I have to love him? But The Lady's pressing arms and the scent of jasmine jumbled my thoughts. I snuggled against her, forgetting the boy with his stolen happiness. I would trade all the wealth in Aritsar to be held. To be touched without fear. To never be called *dangerous*.

"Are you listening, Made-of-Me?" The Lady whispered. I closed my eyes and nodded, resting my cheek on her

breast. Her heart raced like a hummingbird. Her next words were halting, cautious. “When you meet this boy in the portrait . . .”

Something that had slept for years rose in my belly, searing my skin, like the cuff on Melu’s arm had done. I opened my eyes. For a moment, in my reflection on the portrait’s surface, my pupils glowed like emeralds.

“When you love him the most, and when he anoints you as his own . . .” The Lady touched the boy’s face, blotting out his dazzling smile. “I command you to kill him.”