

TOMI ADEYEMI



CHILDREN
OF
ANGUISH
AND
ANARCHY

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*To The Most High,
Thank you for the mountaintops and the valleys,
and the incredible journey in between.*



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: YEMOJA

.....

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: OGÚN

.....

ÌMÓLÈ 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

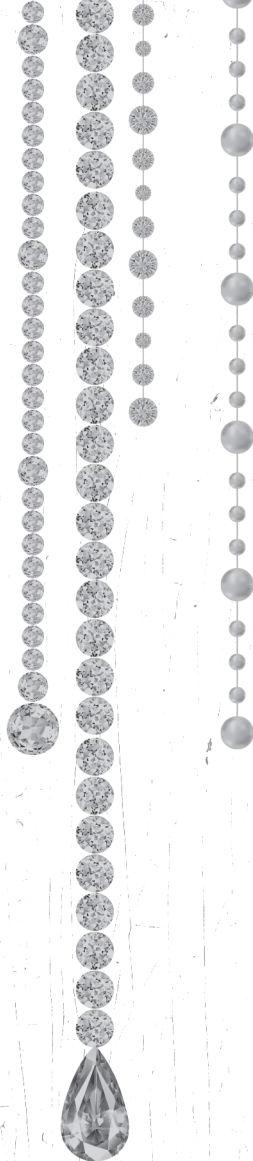
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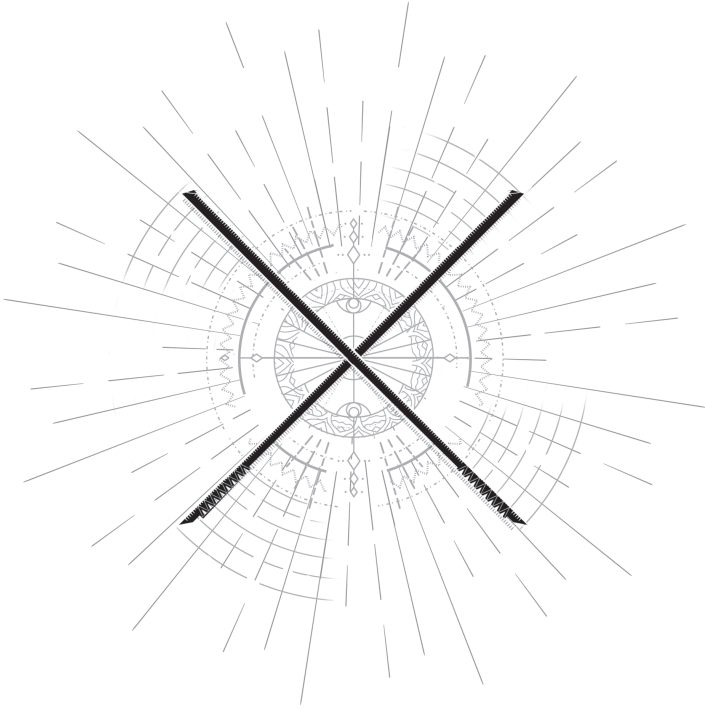
ERANKO CLAN

MAJI OF ANIMALS

MAJI TITLE: TAMER

DEITY: OXOSI







*I keep thinking about before . . .
before it all began.
Before the scroll,
and the stone,
and the promise of magic.
Before our war against the monarchy
broke out across the lands.
I think of the divine storm the Iyika brought to Lagos's gates.
The way the palace windows shattered like glittering rain.
I think of Mama and Baba,
of my brother, Tzain.
I think of Mâzeli and my Reapers,
of how we were supposed to reign. . . .
That was before the Skulls threw us onto their ships.
Before they stripped us of all we had.
Before they dragged me away from those I loved,
held me down, and shaved my head.
Before I looked into the eyes of my abductors
and could only see the blood runes carved into their masks.
I think of all the maji who were stolen from their lands.
All the maji who will never feel
Orïsha
again.*





PART I

CHAPTER ONE



ZÉLIE

HELP ME.

The quiet prayer waits on my lips—afraid to be spoken aloud, somehow knowing if I reach for help, only silence will follow. Heat hangs like the shackles around my neck. The air churns with the stench of the dead. A thick layer of dirt and grime coats every section of my skin. My bones ache from within.

Thunder rumbles like the pounding of canvased drums, stirring me from my haze. It draws me from my dark corner up to the curved iron bars that create my hanging cage. The metal shackles around my ankles clank together as I press my face as far into the bars as it will go. Fresh rain and sea spray break through the shaft above my cell.

I close my eyes and inhale.

Oya . . .

The name of my goddess fills me. It moves something in my soul. Her brewing storm calls out to me like a song. It holds the promise to make me whole.

For a few moments, the slanted rain washes away my pain. The distant thunder carries me back to better days. The whistling winds take me to the snowcapped mountains of Ibadan, the village I lived in before the Raid. I used to shake in my cot when the thunder roared.

It was Mama who taught me not to fear the rain.

“You must not be afraid, my love.” Even after all these years, the memory of Mama’s voice wraps around my heart. I feel the warmth of her soft fingers against my cheek. The gentle cadence she used to speak.

“Oya doesn’t just visit us in death,” Mama whispered into my ear. *“We can feel her presence in the storms and the racing winds.”*

I remember the way Mama coaxed me out of bed, past Baba and Tzain, fast asleep in their hanging cots. It wasn’t the first night she brought me to the mountaintop, but it was the first time she brought me to meet the storm.

She took my hand and led me up a winding trail. I could hardly see beyond the tangle the winds made of my white hair. Our bare feet slid along the gravel-lined path. Every time I tried to turn back, Mama forced me to go on.

By the time we reached the flattened mountain peak, the huts of our sleeping village looked like anthills hundreds of meters below. Jagged silhouettes flickered around us every time a lightning bolt lit up the sky. I felt like I could reach over the peak’s edge and touch the clouds.

“Feel her, Zélie.”

My tiny frame shivered in the pounding rain, but the violent downpour only made Mama feel more alive. She stretched her long arms wide and raised her head to the chaos above.

When the lightning crackled around her, she looked like a god.

“That’s it, little Zél.” Mama nodded. I closed my eyes and lifted my hands to the raging skies. *“Oya’s storms don’t just bring the rain. They’re our harbinger of her sacred change.”*

I hold on to the memory of Mama’s words until my eyes begin to sting. Every time I think I can’t lose anything else, I lose everything.

I’ve lost count of how many times over the past moon I’ve called out

to my gods. How many times nothing but sorrow has answered in return. I cannot bear to hope anymore.

The more I hope, the further I fall.

“No! No, please!”

Sharp screams break through the wooden floorboards above. I wince as the girl’s shrieks grow. I don’t know what hurts more—the sound of the maji’s screams, or the haunting silence that follows when they stop.

There have always been enemies to fight. Always those who wished the maji harm. I knew our battles might never end. But I never thought those battles would stretch beyond Orïsha’s borders.

It’s been almost a full moon since the Skulls descended upon Orïsha’s shores. A full moon since my fellow maji and I were ripped away from our home. After we awoke on the ship, they separated the boys from the girls.

That was the last time I saw my brother, Tzain.

At first, I had the other female elders—the captured members of the resurrected maji clans. But for the past half-moon, I’ve been locked in this hold alone, left to face the Skulls’ torture on my own.

I still don’t know why they’ve taken us. I don’t know to where we sail. All I know is that before the Skulls abducted us, the maji were closer to victory than we’d ever been before.

We were moments away from winning the war. . . .

“Attack!”

Tattoos ignite along my skin, covering my body in a twisting light.

Gravel and dirt float around our feet.

Bark splits in the surrounding trees.

The legion of tîtans run forward in droves, all glimmering in their golden armor. When I raise my hand, every tîtán freezes in place.

They seize as I close my fist. . . .

When I shut my eyes, I can still see it—the battle for Lagos runs through my mind. When we brought magic back to Orisha, it didn't just return to the maji. The sacred ritual gave birth to the tîtáns, granting Queen Nehanda and her military followers devastating power.

Before our final attack, Mama Agba sacrificed her life, allowing me to connect my heart to the hearts of the other nine maji elders. Together, we created a force the tîtáns couldn't withstand. As a united front, the maji elders commanded the earth and raised the winds.

That night was supposed to be the end of the monarchy's reign. The night the maji joined together to rule our kingdom again. After centuries of oppression, our fight was at an end.

We had retribution for all of our pain.

But now . . .

I stare at my shackled hands. At my bare brown skin. The tattoos that used to glow are gone. My white mane has been ripped away. The magic I fought so hard to restore is dead. My Orisha is farther away than it's ever been.

I don't know how to carry on.

I don't know how to hold on to the will to live.

"Oya, please . . ." I whisper the words, risking the heartbreak of another unanswered call. But thunder still rumbles through the ventilation shaft. I have to believe that even this far from Orisha's shores, the thunder means Oya is here at last.

"Please." I think of all the times she's answered me before. The glimpses I've caught of her hurricane spirit, raging like the storms. "Please free us from these Skulls. Please bring your people back home—"

"Bindið hendr honum!" a shout rings out.

My stomach drops at the harsh, guttural sound of the Skulls' tongue. Heavy boots thunder over the floorboards above, and lines of sawdust

rain into my eyes. Feeling drains from my fingertips as I prepare for the Skull's cold grip. My neck burns in anticipation of the thick needle they'll jam into my throat, the venomous majacite they'll pump into my blood. Every night, the Skulls return like clockwork, injecting the poison into my body to keep me numb.

"Oya, please!"

I reach for the magic my goddess once granted me—the power to raise the spirits of those who have passed. I can't bear another night of the Skulls' beastly palms holding me down. Of pain so great, I can hardly make a sound.

There were days when entire armies of animations fought at my command, days when my spirit soldiers ripped through my enemies like the wind. If I could raise just one, I could hold the Skulls back.

With one animation, I would have a fighting chance.

"Please!" I beg. But no matter how hard I push, no power comes forth. I'm left staring at my open palms. I haven't felt the touch of my magic since we sailed from Orisha's shores—

The wooden door to my hold shudders open. I scramble to the farthest corner of my cage. Fear slams my mouth shut. The Skulls beat us whenever they hear my tongue.

Torchlight dances into the hold as the first Skull enters. Flames light the same mask they all wear—skeleton heads smelted together in bronze and blood. The crushed bones come together in jagged pieces, creating one large, tarnished skull.

Braids run through the Skull's auburn curls. Unruly scars cover his bare chest. Bloodstains coat his beastly hands and his wool pants. A crimson axe hangs from his animal-skin belt.

I brace myself against the bars of my cage as the Skull leers at me, an animal closing in. His snarl is apparent despite the bronze mask fixed over the bridge of his nose and hooked underneath his chin.

In his eyes, I see the gaze of every enemy I've had to face. Every opponent who's ever stood in my way. The way the Skull stares at me now . . .

I ball my fists.

King Saran's beady eyes held the same hate.

Do your worst. I meet his stare. I won't cower. I won't show fear. But more boots follow overhead. Instead of opening my cage, the Skull uses his ring of brass keys to unlock another.

"Let me go!"

I crane my neck as the familiar sound of Orishan travels down the stairs. Two Skulls enter with a struggling prisoner between their burly arms. A canvas bag covers the boy's head. Fresh blood is splattered across his bruised chest.

The boy thrashes as the Skulls throw him into the second cage. The men struggle to shackle the prisoner's wrists. With a sudden wrench, the boy slips free and kicks, sending a hard heel into a Skull's nose.

"*Náðu hann!*" the injured Skull calls.

I watch in awe as the boy puts up a valiant fight. He drives his other foot into the second Skull's chest. He throws a wild punch, colliding with another Skull's mask. Though blinded, he strikes in all directions, doing everything he can to attack.

"*bú lítill skíttr!*" the third Skull shouts. His ferocity makes me curl. He seizes the boy's hand and holds it in the cage's doorframe. I turn away as the bronze Skull slams the door shut.

"*Agh!*" The crack of breaking bones echoes through the cell. The boy writhes on the floor. Phantom pain shoots through my own fingers. I hold them as they shake.

New shackles clamp shut around the boy's wrists. The Skulls lock him inside and retreat. A padlock clicks behind the hold's door. I don't dare speak until the thundering boots fade.

"Are you alright?" I lean forward. I don't know what to do. What to

say. A string of curses flies from the boy's lips. Blood leaks from his broken hand.

His chest heaves with shuddering breaths. But after a long moment, he pulls the canvas bag off his head.

It can't be. . . .

My mouth falls open. My heart sinks into my chest. The damp walls around me close in. My cage starts to spin.

“Inan?” Rage grips me as I dare to whisper the name.

The boy shifts, and a thin ray of moonlight illuminates the amber eyes I know far too well.

CHAPTER TWO



ZÉLIE

MY GODS.

Blood pounds between my ears. I don't know what to think. What to feel. A part of me wants to wrap a chain around Inan's neck. Another part of me can't believe that he's here.

The last time I saw Inan, we were in the palace cellars. The *Iyika* razed the royal throne to the ground. As the palace fell, I chased Inan down. He was my final target.

I went in for the kill.

"You're alive." The familiar scratch of his voice is like a chain pulling me back in time. In an instant, I'm thrown back into our fight.

The moment before we were knocked unconscious by the thick cloud of white . . .

There are nights when you visit my dreams. Nights where I can forget. When I wake, I drive myself insane thinking of what could've been.

I don't know what comes next, but I know it's time for this reign to end. But should our paths collide again, I will not raise my sword.

I am ready to end my life at your hand.

My own hands shake as I stare at him, remembering that fateful night. Inan vowed to dissolve the monarchy. He vowed to destroy his own birthright.

After every broken promise between us, I didn't allow myself to believe another lie. From the moment we met, the crown was everything to Inan—worthy of every sacrifice. Orïsha's throne was the very thing he lived to protect.

It didn't matter who else had to die.

But that night, Inan went through with his plan. Despite everything against him, he ended his family's long reign. When I faced him in the underground cellars, he never put up a fight.

He shared the monarchy's secrets with me as I ripped away his life.

Staring at Inan now, my mind races. A full moon at sea has taken its toll on his sturdy frame. This long below deck, his cinnamon skin has gone pale, creating a stark canvas for the fresh and faded bruises traveling down his back. His movements are sharp. Almost feral. Something about him feels more animal than man.

But entire oceans span between our past and our present. Old fury wars with relief. I feel the guarded diviner I was when we first met. The sting of the venom from the brooding little prince. The force of his sword against my staff. The brush of his lips against my neck.

I see the boy who told me we could build a new Orïsha.

The boy who tore my heart in half.

But what does that mean when we're both trapped in here?

What does that mean when the Skulls are closing in?

"Your hair," Inan croaks.

I lift my fingers to my bare scalp, and my cheeks burn. I've been alone for so long.

No one else has seen what the Skulls have done.

"There was a man. . . ." My voice trails off as I remember his shadowy figure. "His mask gleamed in silver."

"The captain of the ship?" Inan asks.

I nod. "The other Skulls listened to him. He must have been."

I try to continue, but the words disappear. The memories strike like the tides. Slowly, I'm brought back to the way the Silver Skull loomed over me. I feel the sweat that dripped down my skin.

Two Skulls held me down the first night they locked me in here. Another took hot shears to my scalp. The Silver Skull raised the twisted majacite crown in his hands.

The world darkened when I realized his plan.

I thrashed as the Silver Skull shoved the poisonous metal into my temple. The searing alloy steamed as it merged with my skin. When I passed out on the rusted floor, tears streamed down my face.

I begged for death's embrace.

With the majacite welded to my temple, I don't know if I'll be able to access my gifts again.

"I'll kill them," Inan almost growls. Nothing soft lies in his amber eyes. His conviction makes my throat tight. It stirs the feelings I've tried to bury deep inside.

"I know I've hurt you." Inan averts his gaze. "I know I've let you down more times than I can count. But I need you to trust me."

"Trust you?" I scoff.

"If the two of us can bring down a kingdom, we have to be capable of bringing down a single ship."

Though everything in me wants to keep Inan at bay, the threat of the Skulls takes that choice away. For the first time since being locked in this hold, I have an ally.

I have a chance to escape.

I force myself to reach deep down, past every single betrayal, past every fallen tear. I have to trust him.

At least until we're out of here.

"What can we do?" I ask.

Inan rips a strip of cloth from his dirt-stained pants and ties the strip

around his bleeding hand. His swinging cage creaks as he paces the small perimeter. He tests the iron bars' strength.

"How long have you been locked in this hold?" he questions.

"Half a moon."

"Do you still have your magic?"

I shake my head. "Every night . . ."

Inan extends his neck to the rays of moonlight, illuminating the puncture wounds along his throat that mirror my own.

"I know about the liquid majacite," Inan says. "If we could stop it somehow . . . disrupt their supply—"

"There's no guarantee our magic would return." I look down at my empty palms, wishing I could stir the ashê that used to lie within my blood. "Our powers come from our land. We might not be able to restore them unless we return home."

"Then we need to overwhelm them." Inan grabs the iron bars as he thinks. "Break free at once. The others have been working on a plan."

"What do they need to escape?"

"A distraction. A way to get close to the Skulls without them realizing what's going on. But we can't think about that now. We need to get you out of this hold."

The seas push against our damp walls, making our hanging cages creak. Inan runs his hands up and down the bars, likely searching for a place where the metal is weak.

"Why'd they take you?" he continues. "Why'd they separate you from the others?"

I stop and think back to the day. So much of my time in this cage has passed in a haze. Moments spent waiting for the Skulls to descend. Hours spent in agony after they inject the majacite into my neck.

"They lined us all up. Every girl, one level above." I close my eyes until I see it—the Silver Skull fills the blackness of my mind. I hear the

creaking floorboards under his approaching boots. I feel the warmth of the girls' shaking bodies, pressed tight against mine. "The Silver Skull separated us with some kind of compass—"

"What did it look like?" Inan asks.

I focus, trying to remember exactly what I saw. "Bronze. Hexagon-shaped. A triple arrowhead painted in blood . . ."

The terror that gripped me that day returns like the rain. I see the compass's thick red dial. I hear the way it hummed as it spun. I could barely survive waiting with the others in chains. I didn't realize how much worse it'd be to be taken away.

"Did it react to others?" Inan continues.

"A few." I nod. "They took me and three other girls. A Lighter from Ibadan. A girl from Zaria's coast. A Healer from the sand huts of Ibeji."

I think of the Healer's round face, the lilt in her voice, her kind beauty, her grace. I recall the ways she collected rainwater and instructed us to dress our wounds, caring for us all, despite the pain she faced.

"Where are they now?" Inan pushes. A crease forms above his thick brows and I look down at the rusted floor. The empty cages answer in my silence.

"We have to get you off this ship." Inan's pacing quickens. His eyes dart around the hold. "We don't have time to wait for the others. We need to find a new way to escape."

The way Inan moves makes my stomach clench. There's something he holds back.

"What is it?" I press. "What do you know?"

Inan stops and holds my gaze.

"These men aren't just searching for maji, Zélie. They're searching for you."

CHAPTER THREE



INAN

“ME?” ZÉLIE WHISPERS.

Her delicate face falls.

Locked behind the curved bars of her cage, she looks so weak.

Weak and small.

Dried blood rains from the black crown embedded into her temple. Her mane of white coils is no more. Moonlight catches a ring of black and purple bruises around her neck. It makes me want to drive a blade through every Skull’s mask.

“I don’t understand.” Zélie looks to me. “How would they even know who I am?”

Even in the dark, I see the terror that snakes around her throat.

I felt that terror myself those first hollow nights on this boat.

I thought it was all over—the war between the maji and the títans. The line of bodies left in my family’s wake. I sedated my own mother to dissolve Orísha’s throne. I thought the plague brought on by my family was at its end.

When Zélie and her maji attacked, I felt relief. I awaited my final release. She laid her hands on my chest, and tendrils of white hair floated past her sharp cheeks. I thanked the gods that it was her, that I had one final chance to see her face.

But a thick gas billowed as it traveled down the hall. Zélie couldn't see the approaching wall of white. One by one, maji fell unconscious. Masked mercenaries descended upon their bodies like vultures.

We were all lost in the fight. The Skulls didn't hesitate to strike. There was nothing we could do.

My people were stolen in the dead of night.

"There are always enemies, Inan. . . ."

Father's ghost joins me in my cage, bleeding through my scars. I brush my good hand against the leathery skin where he stabbed me after seeing my magic and learning who I truly was.

The damp hold starts to fade. Father's voice brings me back to earlier days. Suddenly I'm twelve years old, surrounded by old books, burgundy walls, yellowed maps. Father sipped from his goblet of wine, watching intently as I moved my sênet pawn.

"They lie in wait." He stared at the decorated game board. *"Inside your kingdom and beyond. The moment you show weakness is the moment they strike."*

Father shifted his final sênet piece to capture mine.

"Remember, Inan—an entire empire can crumble in one night."

I wonder what he'd say now that real enemies have invaded our shores. If he were still alive, would the Skulls have had a chance?

If I'd been a better king, could I have held their invasion back?

There's no time for regret.

I force myself to wipe the memories of Father from my mind. The Skulls invaded under my rule. Crown or no crown, it's my duty to protect my people. I have to find a way to defeat the Skulls and expel them from our borders.

"These men hail from a land to the far east," I explain, recalling what I've seen. What I've heard. They used a few prisoners across the

ship. Working on their deck was the only way for me to learn. “They call themselves the Tribes of Baldeírik. They sail under one king, a man named Baldyr. Whoever they’re searching for, they’re searching on his behalf.”

Zélie’s feet falter. She has to grab the bars of her cage to stay upright.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Something one of Roën’s mercenaries once said . . .” Zélie’s fingers lift to her lips. “We were back in Jimeta, the moon after magic returned. Harun cornered me and spoke of a bounty. Do you think he was talking about the Skulls?”

“He must have been.” I can’t count the number of times the night we were taken has played in my mind. “It was the mercenaries who abducted us from the palace. If Roën sold us out—”

“No.” Zélie cuts me off. “He wouldn’t. He *couldn’t*. He parted with his men. He fought by our side! He wouldn’t do this to me. To the maji—”

“But would his crew?” I push. “Cities of maji have been disappearing from Orisha for moons.”

Zélie hesitates and her fingers fall to her side. “We got reports during the war, but the elders and I thought it was you.”

“Mother and I thought it was you.”

An entire empire can crumble in one night.

Father’s old teachings swim in my head as guilt rises like bile up my throat. We made it so easy for the Skulls. They’ve been raiding our lands for moons.

But if our empire can crumble in one night, theirs can, too. If we escape this ship, we have a chance.

We can obliterate their forces in one fair fight.

“The Skulls keep saying one thing,” I continue. “‘*Stúlkan með blóðið sólarinnar.*’”

Zélie shudders at the sound of the enemy's tongue.

"What does that mean?" she asks.

"A girl with the blood of the sun."

Zélie's silver gaze grows distant. I've never seen the empty look in her eyes. The weight of my words seems to hit her like a boulder. She fights not to cry.

"Do you really think it's me?"

I tread gently. I don't know how much more she can take. "They need someone with great power . . . that's why I think—"

Zélie's chest starts to heave. She claws at her own skin, as if struggling to breathe. I push against the front of my cage.

I would give anything to take her terror away.

"There's a way off this ship," I talk quickly. "Three levels up. They have lifeboats on the deck. If we can board just one, we can head to land. Get you back to Orisha. Figure out a plan!"

Though Zélie fights her own haggard breaths, she shakes her head, rejecting my idea.

"The others," she manages to gasp. "Amari. Tzain. The elders—"

"If we can get you off this ship, I'll find a way to free the rest. But you're the one these Skulls are after. You're the one we have to protect."

Zélie wraps her arms around herself. I yearn to wrap my arms around her instead. Staring at her now brings me back to another time, back to those nights in the dreamscape when I was hers and she was mine.

The abyss grows in her silver eyes. The little light I feel inside of her dies. For a long while, the waves crash in our silence. Then Zélie lifts her head.

"Tell me it's going to be alright."

Her whispers hit me like a spear to the chest. I think of my vow to protect her. To fight for her with every last beat of my heart.

"It's going to be alright." I speak the words without a shadow of a

doubt. “I don’t care what it takes. I don’t care who we have to face. We’re going to get you out of here. We’re going to get you back home.”

“Promise me.”

For an instant, I don’t feel the cages between us. I don’t carry the toll of the countless battles we’ve fought. The strain of the parents we’ve taken away. The weight of the broken kingdom that tore us apart.

For a single breath, we are together—connected, just like that first day in Lagos’s marketplace. I run my fingers through the jagged white streak that appeared in my hair after that fateful moment, remembering the jolt like lightning that passed through my skin. It’s like our very spirits wove together. My heart thrums with the bond neither of us has ever been able to break, despite every wound and every mistake.

“I *promise*,” I whisper. I reach out my good hand. Though I can’t bridge the entire space, Zélie reaches back. Her breaths start to relax.

“We’ll get through this,” I assure her. “I just need time—”

Boots thunder above. Too fast for me to prepare. With a click of the padlock, the door to the hold flies open. A wall of torchlight floods in.

The captain . . .

The Silver Skull enters, distinguished from every other bronze Skull on this ship. Tall and stocky, the captain towers above the rest. Crude tattoos cover the shaved sides of his head.

The Silver Skull mutters something to his men as he holds a torchlight to our faces. It passes over mine with disdain before stopping in front of Zélie’s. My heart constricts when the Silver Skull raises a leather-clad finger and points.

It’s happening, I realize.

We’ve run out of time.

“No!” I bang against the iron bars. I don’t know what to fear more. If they take Zélie now, she’ll never return. And what will happen to Orisha if the Skulls find what they’re searching for?

Zélie throws herself to the back of her cage. The other Skulls open her cell door. Though she struggles, they unlock the shackles around her neck, waist, and ankles. Two Skulls lift her up, and Zélie thrashes in their arms.

“Inan!” Zélie cries out.

A new set of shackles clamps shut around her wrists. I rage against the bars as they drag her away.

But the door to the hold swings shut, keeping me locked in this cage.

CHAPTER FOUR



ZÉLIE

GODS HELP ME.

My insides freeze. Inan's shouts die in the hold below. The Silver Skull yells orders at his men, and we follow close behind, ascending the wooden steps in the cramped stairwell.

The Skulls' meaty palms dig into my arms. Their hooded eyes gleam in the dark. A sulfur scent rises from the pouch bombs strapped to their animal-skin belts. Brine coats their fair skin and their chestnut hair.

Where is he taking me?

The human bones embedded in the Skulls' masks glower in the flickering torchlight. Even without my magic, I sense the torment soaked into the crushed skeletons. I hear the cries of their dead.

The fight that started to light in me before withers away. The hope of escape strangles me, restraining me like my chains. Everything Inan shared with me swirls in my mind.

If I'm the one they're after, I die tonight.

They're searching for a girl. I hear Inan's voice. *A girl with the blood of the sun.*

I think back to the sunstone that shattered in my hands the moment I brought magic back. I remember the power that surged through my form, the force that crashed through my very being, threading deep

into my heart. In that instant creation swirled before my eyes, the birth of man, the origin of the gods. Is that power what these beasts hunt now?

Do I even hold that power if I can't feel my magic at all?

I have to break free.

I ball my fists. Escape is my only hope. But what can I do with my hands in chains? How can I fight when I can't even move my legs?

As we move past yards of rope and tarp-covered cannons, I search for a weapon, anything I can use to escape. The broken shards of wood that hang overhead, the rusted harpoons mounted on the walls. I look down at the Skulls' waists and shift, wondering what it would take to snatch one of their knives. A few daggers hang from each of their belts, but they pale in comparison to the crimson hammers and axes strapped to each Skull's back.

Something about their weapons feels alive. . . .

When we reach the top of the stairs, I'm hit with a familiar stench. The cells I shared with the others when the Skulls first locked me on to their ship hang with the bite of death. Flames pass over rows of cages, revealing broken bones and gaunt brown faces. There are nearly a dozen young girls per cage. They cower as the Skulls near.

"Zélie?"

I hear Amari's hushed whisper before I see her emaciated frame. The sight of my former ally takes me by surprise—her hollowed cheeks, her sunken eyes. A ripped kaftan hangs over her skeletal shoulders. Her bones protrude from her copper skin. Grime and dirt mat the curls in her hair. She withers from within.

Hold on. I mouth the words. Instinct to protect overpowers our former war. I can't bear the sight of her in enemy chains. Her slender face, twisted in pain.

Across from Amari I spot Nào, the elder of the Tider clan. Always

one of the most powerful fighters in our group, I hardly recognize the scrawny figure who stares back.

Cropped white coils pepper her formerly shaved head. She looks at me like she's crawled back from the dead. Nâo reaches her tattooed arm through the bars of her cell as we pass. The Silver Skull is quick to react.

"*Farđu!*" The captain bangs on the bars of her cage. Nâo and the girls back up at once, staring after me as the Skulls carry me away.

But they're alive. We're still alive.

I attempt to let the news spark hope. But pairs of empty shackles lie between the lines of girls. Every maji I was captured with isn't onboard.

I note the open chains where Imani, the leader of the Cancers, once was. The freckled face of her twin sister, Khani, fills my mind. Grief tears at me from inside.

If I lost my brother to this horrid ship, I would die.

Flames dance over the faces of eight maji chained to a corpse, a body they've yet to throw overboard. The young girl's round eyes hang open, and a tattered rag doll lies in her clenched hand.

She can't be more than twelve.

How could this happen?

The girl's body haunts me as the Skulls drag me through the long, damp hall. My body aches with the pain she must have felt. The utter misery her final hours of life held.

I take in the captured faces of my people, the festering lesions where the Skulls' shackles meet their skin. The cramped quarters echo with their unspoken fears, their questions of whether or not they'll ever escape from here.

I think back to Inan's plan, his insistence that I need to escape. Despite what the Skulls may be after, this can't just be about me. We are all locked in these cages.

We all need to break free.

Push, Zélie.

The heat of determination flares in my core. I try to move, though panic seizes every limb. My legs start to shift as the Silver Skull opens the door to the next level. We rise up another narrow stairwell.

When we reach the next hall, the sight of the boys sparks a new thought—I consider how many maji sit before me now, how many Skulls might lie above deck. What chance might we have if the maji on the ship outnumber the Skulls?

How many of us would need to break free to overwhelm them all?

Seven . . . nineteen . . . My head swivels from side to side as I try to keep count. Hatred burns through me with each protruding rib cage and hollowed face I pass.

If I could just get the keys . . .

I glance to the Skull on my left; a ring of brass keys jangles against his hip. The Skull jostles me, and my majacite crown pricks at my forehead.

Its blackened thorns hang just beneath his chin. . . .

This is it. I brace myself. One shot is all I'll have. I rear my head back. My body quivers with my impending attack.

But before I can strike, we pass another cage. Everything changes when I see a familiar frame.

A boy with sturdy shoulders and cropped black hair.

My brother, Tzain.

CHAPTER FIVE



ZÉLIE

“TZAIN?”

For the first time since they locked me on to this ship, a smile spreads across my lips. Feeling returns to my legs in a rush. The sight of my brother hardens something in my gut.

Tzain sits in the corner of a cage, face buried in his hands. When I speak, his body goes rigid. He lifts his head, and his dark brown eyes meet mine.

What do they need to escape? The question I asked Inan back in the hold runs through my mind.

A distraction. A way to get close to the Skulls without them realizing what's going on.

Time slows down as I soak in Inan's words. I can give my brother that.

If a distraction is what he needs, I won't hold back!

“*Hah!*” I ram my head into the Skull to my left. The thorns of my crown break through his mask, impaling his right eye. The Skull cries out as hot blood spurts between his fingertips. It coats my chin as we fall to the floor.

The other Skull reaches for me as I scramble forward. With another

roar, I kick out, and my heel connects with the Skull's jaw. He hits the wooden floor with a heavy thud. His ring of brass keys goes flying down the hall.

There! I move for the keys, but the Silver Skull cuts me off. The captain lunges at me, a frenzy filling his hazel eyes.

Before the captain can strike, a maji named Udo comes to my defense. I recognize the skilled Welder though they've shaved his full beard. Metal burns cover his large hands. He shouts after me as I pass.

Udo whips out a pair of empty shackles, catching the Silver Skull by his feet. The captain crashes into the bars of a cage. A small dagger in his belt slides free.

This must be it. I extend my leg and kick, sending the dagger into Udo's cell. As the ship shifts, the maji turn rabid. The long hall echoes with the power of their rage.

But in the chaos, the maji claw at the fallen Skulls. They snap weapons and tools from their belts. Bits of rusted metal and dropped knives disappear into their cells.

As they work, my eyes return to the ring of brass keys sitting down the hall. The Skulls are still down.

There's a chance I can set these maji free right now!

I launch myself up, closing the distance between me and Tzain. My brother throws himself against the bars of his cell. The five maji he's chained to are dragged forward by his strength.

I leap over the Silver Skull. Even with his mask, I see the anger our rebellion brings. The captain's fingers graze my ankle, but I don't slow down. My heartbeat spikes as I snatch up the keys.

"Hurry!" Tzain yells. The ship jostles me from side to side as I fight my way back to his cell. My muscles burn with the strain, yet I run as fast as I can.

When I reach his cage, Tzain grabs my shoulders. I don't know how

long it's been since I felt anything but the enemy's cold hands. Tears well in my eyes as I struggle to fit the first brass key into his lock. When the gears don't shift, Tzain steadies my shaking hands.

"Breathe," he whispers. "*Breathe.*"

With a large exhale, I force myself to calm down. I pull out the first key and move to the next. I jam in the third. The fourth. The fifth.

The floors creak as the Skulls rise behind me. The hairs lift on the nape of my neck.

"Go!" Tzain tries to push me away.

"I won't leave you!" I shout back. I jam the sixth key into the lock. With a click, the gears start to shift. I twist to pull him out—

All at once, Tzain shoves me to the floor. A knife meant for my shoulder lodges into his right arm. Tzain roars and stumbles back. The brass keys are yanked from my hands.

The Skull I impaled hovers over me, baring his bloodstained teeth. Crimson droplets fall onto my neck. He removes the hammer in his sheathe.

"*Nei!*" the Silver Skull shouts. I crawl away as the bronze Skull transforms. His blood soaks into the rectangular runes carved into the oak shaft of his hammer. The same runes carve themselves down the Skull's chest.

The bronze Skull cries out as the hammerhead glows red. The very air around him shakes. Veins bulge against his fair skin. His muscles swell with new strength.

My eyes widen as the bronze Skull grows so tall he eclipses the captain's height. The entire hall freezes at his display.

I didn't know the Skulls could fight this way.

"*Hættu!*" The captain lunges. It takes all of him to tackle the bronze Skull. With great force, the captain shoves his warrior against the cells. The bronze Skull dents the iron bars.

My pulse races as heated words pass between them. The Silver Skull points to the majacite crown on my head.

“*Hún tilheyrrar Baldyri!*” he declares.

Did he just say Baldyr?

The bronze Skull resheathes his hammer, and the effects of his bloodmetal fade. He stumbles back as he returns to his normal strength. Though a monster of a man moments ago, now he struggles to catch his breath.

The Silver Skull grabs me. He yanks the knife from my brother’s arm and holds the blade to my neck. The edge digs into my throat, forcing me to stay still.

“Hold on!” Tzain shouts as the captain marches me down the hall. “I’m coming! Zélie, I’m coming—”

I don’t hear what my brother says next.

The arched door at the end of the hall flies open. Whipping winds swallow all sound. We pass through the gateway, and the entire world spins. I struggle to take it all in.

Mighty waves crash against the ship’s side. Sea spray stings the open cuts on my head. The yellow moon shines above, and its delicate light spills across my face. I gasp at the sight.

The deck . . .

A second is all I have to savor the fresh sea air. I lift my head to the open sky. A hard rain falls into my eyes. An endless expanse of clouds swirls overhead, forming a blanket over the glittering stars.

Everywhere I turn, Skulls cover the ship—all brawn and menace and grit. Paint is smeared across their fair skin. They shout in their brutish tongue as they man the colossal ship.

Over a hundred meters long, the vessel has seven mastheads spread across the deck. Each square sail ripples with the image of a man formed from storm clouds, the emblem of the Tribes of Baldeírik. Rows of

mounted cannons line both sides of the deck, each positioned to shoot out of the circular gunport. Iron plates reinforce the massive hull, topped with the figurehead of a tarnished silver skull.

The captain sends a Skull back through the arched door before pointing to the opposite end of the ship. Above the deck, living quarters rise three levels high. At the top level, a tower sits. Its walls are marked with white.

That has to be where they're taking me now. . . .

My throat dries as we move. I stare at the place the other girls in my hold disappeared to, never to return. But as we walk, I catch the lifeboats Inan spoke of. Our only way off the ship. Enough for the dozens of Skulls above deck.

Enough for the dozens of maji locked in their cells.

Let it be enough. I think of my brother and the maji, of everything they snatched in the frenzy. If they got what they needed, they still have a chance.

The maji can be free at last.

But when the captain marches me up the stairs, the thoughts of the others vanish. I come face-to-face with a crimson door.

I look up to the sky as they push me inside, praying I'll live to see the yellow moon again.