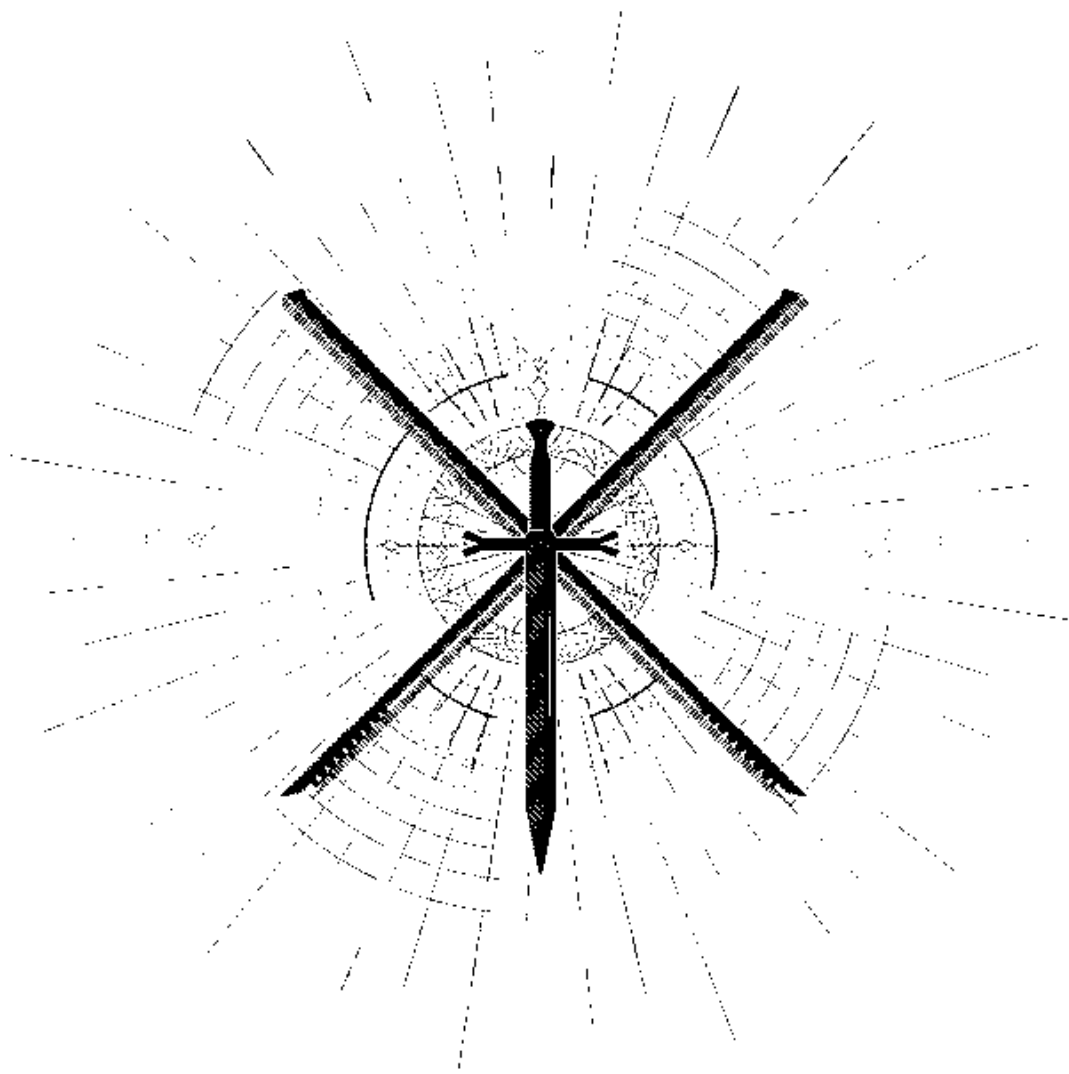


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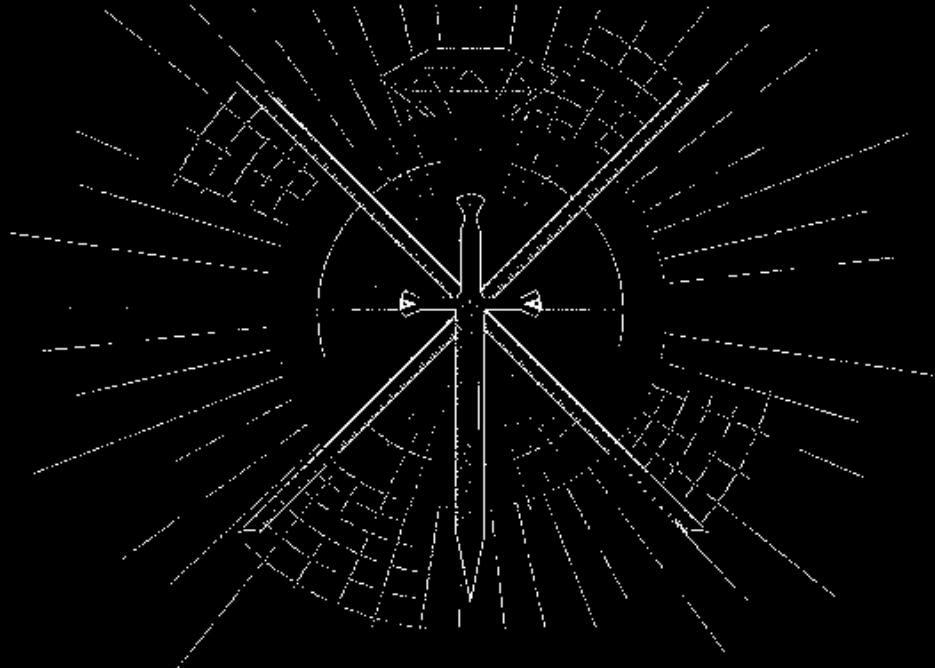
CHILDREN  
OF  
BLOOD  
AND  
BONE







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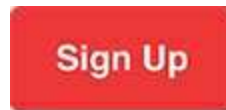
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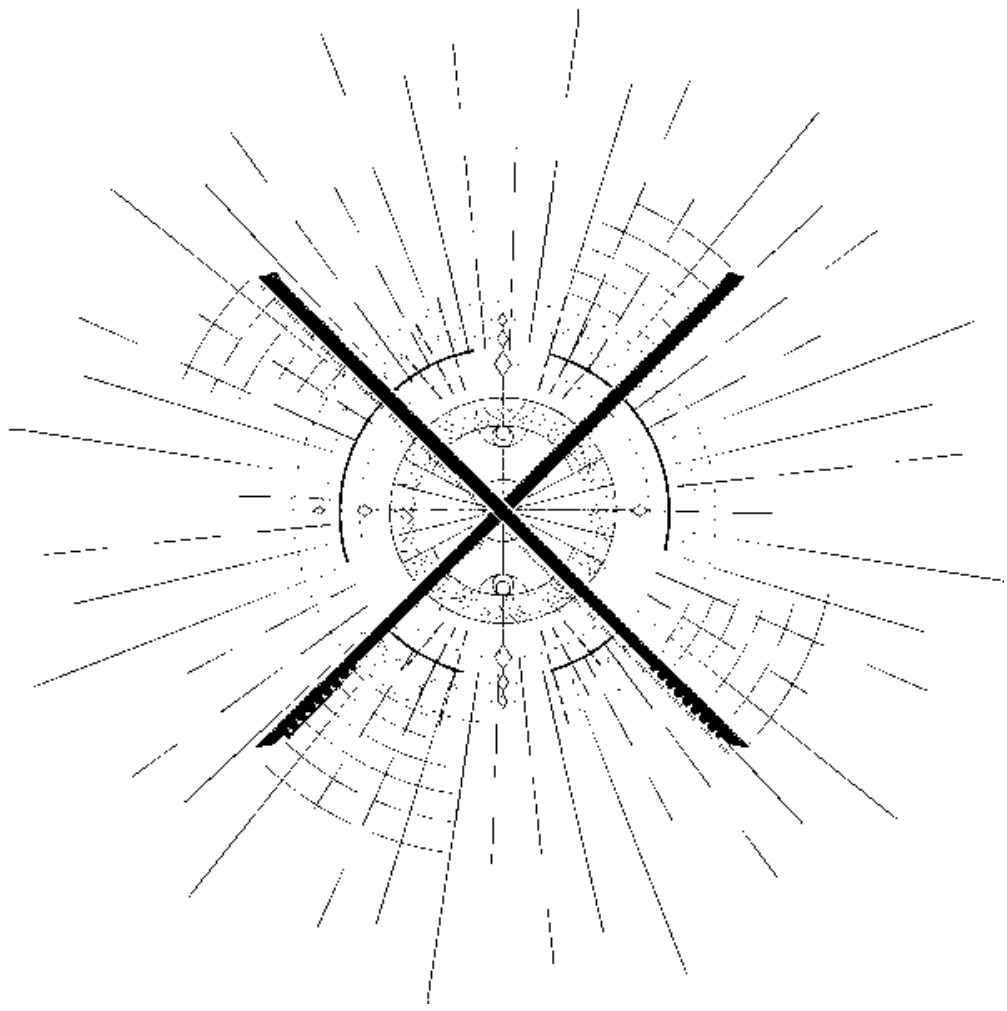


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*To Mom and Dad—  
who sacrificed everything to give me this chance  
&  
To Jackson—  
who believed in me and this story long before I did*



*I try not to think of her.*

*But when I do, I think of rice.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I think about the king who took her away.*





## CHAPTER ONE

# ZÉLIE

*PICK ME.*

It's all I can do not to scream. I dig my nails into the marula oak of my staff and squeeze to keep from fidgeting. Beads of sweat drip down my back, but I can't tell if it's from dawn's early heat or from my heart slamming against my chest. Moon after moon I've been passed over.

Today can't be the same.

I tuck a lock of snow-white hair behind my ear and do my best to sit still. As always, Mama Agba makes the selection grueling, staring at each girl just long enough to make us squirm.

Her brows knit in concentration, deepening the creases in her shaved head. With her dark brown skin and muted kaftan, Mama Agba looks like any other elder in the village. You would never guess a woman her age could be so lethal.

"Ahem." Yemi clears her throat at the front of the ahéré, a not-so-subtle reminder that she's already passed this test. She smirks at us as she twirls her hand-carved staff, eager to see which one of us she gets to defeat in our graduation match. Most girls cower at the prospect of facing Yemi, but today I crave it. I've been practicing and I'm ready.

I know I can win.

"Zélie."

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

Agba's called me.

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

She thinks I'm going to lose.

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

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

"Zélie, do not make me repeat myself."

"But Mama—"

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

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

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

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

“Take position.”

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

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

“Commence!”

And instantly I’m on the defensive.

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

Yemi may be fast, but I can be faster.

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

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

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

Our staffs collide with a loud crack. The reed walls shudder. My weapon is still reverberating from the blow when Yemi pivots to strike at my knees.

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s right, Zél.” Yemi’s voice dips so low only I can hear it. “Listen to

Mama Agba. Be a good little maggot.”

And there it is.

That word.

That miserable, degrading slur.

Whispered with no regard. Wrapped in that arrogant smirk.

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

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

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

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

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

Now the real fight begins.

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

“*Ugh!*”

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

“Halt—”

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

I’m not done yet.

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

“*Ah!*” Yemi gasps. Her face contorts in pain and shock as she reels

backward from my blow. No one's ever struck her in one of Mama Agba's battles. She doesn't know how it feels.

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

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

"What is it?" Mama asks.

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

"Spit it out, child!"

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

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

Then the will to survive takes over.

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

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

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

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

"Zélie!" Mama Agba barks.

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

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

"Mama Agba, I..."

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



*A distraction ...*

A way to buy us time.

“I’m sorry, Mama Agba. Forgive me.”

“Just get back to your station.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tax time,” the darker guard grunts. “Pay up.”

Mama Agba’s face drops like the heat at night. “I paid my taxes last week.”

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

*Of course.* I grip the fabric on my mannequin so hard my fists ache. It’s not enough for the king to keep the diviners down. He has to break anyone

who tries to help us.

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

That's all they'll ever see.

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

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

"Maybe you should stop robbing us."

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

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

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

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

*Majacite ...*

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

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

A powerful maji could fight through its influence, but the rare metal is debilitating for most of us. Though I have no magic to suppress, the proximity of the majacite blade still pricks at my skin as the guard boxes me in.

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

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

But when he's this close to my face, it's all I can do not to jam my sewing

needle into his beady brown eye. Maybe I should be quiet.

Or maybe he should die.

“*You sh—*”

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

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

“Mama, don’t—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come on. We’ve got to cover the village by dusk.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Mama..."

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

*Fool*, she scolds me in Yoruba, the maji tongue outlawed after the Raid. I haven't heard our language in so long, it takes me a few moments to remember what the word even means.

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

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

"I was trying to protect you."

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

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

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

"For gods' sakes, *think*, Zélie. Think about someone other than yourself! Who would protect your father if you hurt those men? Who would keep

Tzain safe when the guards come for blood?”

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

Sooner or later they would break the people I love.

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

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

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

“Zélie asked why we are here. It’s a valid question. We often talk of *how* you must fight, but we never talk about *why*.” Mama sets Bisi down and motions for Yemi to bring her a stool. “You girls have to remember that the world wasn’t always like this. There was a time when everyone was on the same side.”

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

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

A truth the king tried to bury with our dead.

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

Though we’ve all heard this story at one point or another—from Mama Agba, from parents we no longer have—hearing it again doesn’t take the wonder away from its words. Our eyes light up as Mama Agba describes maji

with the gift of healing and the ability to cause disease. We lean in when she speaks of maji who tamed the wild beasts of the land, of maji who wielded light and darkness in the palms of their hands.

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

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

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

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

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

*Only the gods know why?*

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

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

They’re never coming back.