



CHAPTER ONE

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

Waiting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A daughter, a wife, a mother.

My tears join the salt of the sea.

•••

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. You look beautiful, ìyá."

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

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

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

•••

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

My mother.

The woman whose soul I gathered looked just like her.

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

My mother.

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

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



CHAPTER TWO

I STAND WITH the sun on my back and the waves behind me as I face the tree line. The sapphire of my necklace sparkles as I focus my thoughts on the soul inside. And then I am moving once again, doing what is needed in order to bless the woman's essence.

Banana leaves hang down over tan trunks, their green a vivid lime against the white sand. Ignoring them, I bend down toward the low bushes with their spiky leaves and blooms of white and blue.

Yemoja's colors.

Each flower has a splash of gold at its center and a sweet honey scent that grows stronger as I touch my fingertip to a waxy petal, stroking the softness. Carefully, I select seven of the flowers, snapping off their thick stems and holding them loosely so that they are not crushed. The walk back to the sea is slow, my legs not used to the motion now required of them. We honor the people whose souls we gather by blessing them in human form, so I don't complain as I feel the pops of small bones accompany each step. I stop when I reach the hard damp sand, the breeze from the ocean stirring my curls. As I release the flowers into the shallow water, I lift my head to the sky, mouth pursed. Orisas can only be summoned with certain prayers and offerings. Unless called upon,

they remain hidden from human eyes, granting blessings when they see fit, governed only by Olodumare.

“Yemoja, mo bu olá fún ọ pèlú àwọn òdòdó wònyí,” I call, my voice high enough to be heard over the rush of waves. “Jòwó bükún ùn mi pèlú wíwáà rẹ. Fi ore-òfẹ fún mi pèlú ifẹ tí o ní fún gbogbo àwọn ọmọ rẹ. E tẹ s’íwájú.”

The flowers fall into the water, each one gently floating on the tide. I stand back, digging my toes into the warm sand, and repeat my call. “Yemoja, I honor you with these blooms. Please bless me with your presence. Grace me with the love you have for all your children. Come forth.”

Five more times I say this, seven in total, until the sea swells and then recedes, drawing back from the land as if scalded. Shells and seaweed and red crabs dot the bare sand as I run my gaze over unveiled black rocks. My heart races just a little bit faster, as it does every time I get ready to face Yemoja. I slow it down by taking deep breaths of humid air, savoring the feeling, one I won’t have when I return to the sea. The exposed sand is marked with complicated swirls, fashioned by the tides and now seen by the sun. The waves draw out farther and farther, and I examine the slope of beach, struck by its beauty as always.

I wait as the line of now-distant water begins to grow. The jewel at my throat is heavy. I run a fingernail over the facets, remembering the woman’s unraveling hair, the memories her soul showed me. A flare of grief burns through me. *She will be blessed*, I vow, and lay the sapphire down against the heat of my skin. Pushing back my shoulders, I match my posture and expression in signs of respect.

I hold my position as the sea reaches the height of the banana trees before it surges forward. The wave is a giant tumble of teal,

indigo, and turquoise as it rushes toward the shore. A cacophony of water and rocks fills the air, blotting out the calls of birds and, for a moment, even the sun. The day momentarily darkens, and my skin itches in the heat. The sea calls to me, promising to soothe me with its coolness, and I push back the urge to run forward, to plunge myself into the wall of water. I must be ready to greet Yemoja. And just as it seems as if the wave will crash against the shore, destroying all in its path, the water pulses and then draws backward, retreating into a gentler swell that covers the bedrock, lacing the sand with white foam and strands of seaweed.

The beach glistens, its newly decorated expanse leading to the clear shallows. I scan the sudden calm line of the sea, searching, my breath catching as I spot a ripple that grows larger. The sea undulates, shifting and flexing almost like a serpent. And then I see it. The tip of a golden crown. It splits the gentle waves, followed by obsidian coils shining with water. The orisa moves closer to the shore as she emerges from the sea. Thick shoulders and onyx skin glow in the sun as she takes a step onto dry land, her dark blue scales shifting to form a white and indigo wrapper with threads of gold throughout.

“Simidele.” Her voice is both rough and smooth, like satin and sand and smoke. Twin combs hold back the mass of her hair, while a veil of milky pearls obscures the middle of her face. The smells of violets and coconut fill the air. She’s so close that I can see the cowrie shells and sharks’ teeth that are woven in among her curls.

I place my hand on my chest before bowing deeply, my forehead nearly pressing into the hot sand. “Mother Yemoja.”

When I straighten up the orisa smiles, teeth that are sharp points emerging from her generous mouth. She beckons me

closer, the delicate white gold that encircles her wrists and twines up to the tops of her arms glinting.

“I am blessed to see you. It has been a while since you have summoned me,” Yemoja says as she takes a step toward me, pearls clinking. She smiles, flashing curved lips. “Praise Olodumare.”

I look up; the gleam of her black-and-silver gaze reaches me as I clutch my necklace. The jewel is warm in my palm, the only hint of what it contains. As the orisa reaches for the sapphire, I think of the woman’s eyes, so similar to my mother’s.

“Something troubles you,” murmurs Yemoja, drawing her hand back. Her head tilts, hair tumbling down her shoulders, a bulbous emerald glinting from the coils.

For a moment, I can’t speak. All I can think about is the woman’s face and her life memories.

“This soul . . . ,” I say, swallowing hard. I think of the brown of my mother’s eyes, the fullness of her lower lip. “She reminded me of someone.”

Yemoja drifts closer, the scent of violets growing stronger. “And this has upset you.” She doesn’t ask me who the woman called to mind and I don’t offer. Instead, I look down at my bare feet, though I know my feelings are there to hear in the tightness of my words.

“Yes,” I manage as I grasp at the memory I claimed and kept. Of my mother in her star-splashed wrapper and of her smile.

Yemoja lifts my chin with one elongated finger, tipping my gaze to hers. Her eyes soften with sympathy, the silver muted now. “I am sure you remember what I told you when you were remade just months ago, but let me remind you.” The orisa’s voice lowers as she opens her hands, palms to the sun. “The òyìnbó first came to our lands this year, greedy for power and resources. I watched as

they began to steal people, taking them away on their giant ships. And so I left the rivers and streams of our lands and made the sea my home, following the people whose lives were fractured, taken and forced on a different type of journey . . .” Yemoja pauses here, her voice cracking in pain. She takes a moment, breathing deeply as the pearls in her veil sway lightly. “A journey that is eternally horrifying. Enslaved and stripped of their homeland— I wanted to ensure that those who lose their lives on the sea receive comfort and our prayers before they return home to join Olodumare. This I can do through the creation of Mami Wata.” When she drops her gaze to me, her eyes glitter with fervor. “It is not everything, but it is something. It is our honor.”

Questions grow inside my head at her words. Why do we not smash the ships to pieces? Why do we not drag down those who sail them to the black parts of the sea? Yemoja has always been plain-speaking, leaving little room for discussion, but now I open my mouth to speak. The sharpness of the orisa’s glare stops me.

“Tell me, Simidele. Do you trust me and trust in the task I have given you?” Yemoja stares down at me, her dark curls swaying in the breeze.

I nod. My faith in the orisa knows no bounds, but it is always easier to surrender to her guidance in the sea when my memories ebb away, pulled by the tides. She runs a hand down my arm, lightly scraping the skin with her long nails.

“Do you understand all that I ask of you?” Her fingers dig into the soft skin under my chin again, but I don’t wince or pull away, staring back at the orisa. Her pupils are large, slashes in her metallic eyes.

“Yes,” I say. I realize my hands are in fists and force myself to unclench them.

“This is good,” says Yemoja. She pulls me to her and presses her lips against my forehead, holding me in place with warm hands. “All that you need to do, all that you must do, is to gather any souls of those who pass in the sea, and we will say a prayer to bless them on their journey back to Olodumare. This is your purpose. Nothing more, nothing less.” The orisa pulls away and looks down at me. “I need to know that you understand this, Simidele. It is important.”

“Nothing more, nothing less,” I repeat, nodding my head and dipping my gaze in respect.

“Good,” Yemoja says, her silver-and-black eyes still on me. “Now, let the water set your memories afloat. Let it set you free from the pain of the past, of what once was. Focus on your task.” The pearls of her veil clink together as she squeezes me tighter, so tight that my chest is crushed and for a moment, I can’t breathe.

Blackness blooms at the edge of my vision and silver stars, the same shade as Yemoja’s eyes, sprinkle across the creeping dark. I know she is right.

“Of course.” Using the last of my voice, I muster a scraped whisper. “To bless their souls is an honor.”

The pressure disappears as the orisa releases me. My lungs fill once again. I look up to the curve of Yemoja’s mouth as she smiles down at me, to the sharp points of her teeth. “True words indeed, Simidele. Come now, let us say a prayer to release this soul together.”

Yemoja stands before me, the white and indigo folds of her wrapper luminous in the sun. She holds out her large palms, beckoning me closer. I take a step forward and then another, until the orisa towers over me. She hooks a nail under the chain of my necklace so that the sapphire is held between us. It spins lazily in

the sun, sparkles scattering on my skin. The orisa presses her fingers to the gem and I do the same. Together we cradle the jewel, its blue brighter than the sky above us.

At the thought of the soul being blessed, I feel a calm spread through me. Better this, I think. Better an easing of her journey. Yemoja smiles and I join her.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

“Yes, Mother Yemoja.”

“Then let us begin.” The orisa angles her face to the heavens, her rich voice strong. “Arábìnrin a gbà é. Àláfà ni tìrẹ báàyí.”

“We welcome you, sister. Peace is yours now,” I repeat, thinking of the woman’s faded orange wrapper.

“Olodumare ní pè, pẹ̀lú àdúrà yí, á ẹ̀ ìrìn-àjò ẹ̀ padà sí ilé ní ìròrùn, adédàá ẹ̀, ìbèrẹ̀ àti òpin in ẹ̀.”

“Olodumare is calling, and with this prayer, we ease your journey back home, to your maker, your beginning and your end.” I think of her kissing her child.

“A b̀kún fún ọ̀ arábìnrin.”

“We bless you, sister,” I murmur over and over again, until the sapphire releases the soul inside, a gleam of light gold, a shimmer of essence that hovers in the air above us.

“May Olodumare bless you,” we finish, as the soul spirals away from us and a sense of calm envelops the island.

With our words, the woman is sent on her way home to Olodumare, the Supreme Creator.

•••

The jewel feels colder at my throat as Yemoja turns to me. Her smile is sharp beneath her veil, but her voice is soft. She strokes

the sapphire of my necklace once and then bends down to embrace me.

“May Olodumare bless your search, Simidele.”

Before I can answer, the orisa steps into the sea in a flash of gold and pearls and brown arms that slice the surface. All that is left is the scent of violets and coconut, a sweetness that permeates the air as my gaze roams over the water. The trails of Yemoja’s curls, spread out across the waves, are the last thing I see as she sinks back into the depths.

I stand on the warm sand as the sun slides across the sky, crowning my hair with light. Breathing out, I thank Olodumare. Blessing the woman’s soul has gone some way to calm me, but as I contemplate the sea before me, I linger once more over the memory the woman invoked.

Stars on a midnight-blue wrapper and eyes alight with love. Full cheeks and a voice that spins words like silk.

My mother.

I step toward the sea, holding her face in my mind. As the water washes over my feet and the scales begin to form, I feel the seeping of details. Pale gold and pink fabric turns to scales and I can no longer recall the color of her wrapper. The sea reaches my thighs, stealing my skin and legs as well as the wideness of my mother’s smile. As I dip under the waves, the sound of her voice fades and I embrace the coolness, a balm to my sun-soaked skin.

The sea takes me and I let it, but this time I don’t allow it to have everything. The brown of my mother’s eyes stays with me. I take it and tuck it away, bury it in the back of my mind and hope that, if I want to, if I need to, I can return to it. And with it, I join the salty currents and the creatures I now belong with.



CHAPTER THREE

THERE IS NO sleep for me in the sea and so, when I break the surface to search for ships, the sun and moon are my constant companions. Sometimes, I swim downward, taking comfort from the deep. From its darkness and the viperfish that often dart out of sight.

Occasionally I think I see flashes of a star-scattered wrapper, remember the smooth flow of words that spin images in minds. But it is never for long. Instead my thoughts stay simple, merging with the sea and the creatures in it. It is easier to swim between the shifting blues, to skirt the dolphins that nudge me, calling me to play before I head back to the sky and the air to search.

On the last day before Yemoja's seventh, I rise from the depths to discover that the sea and the sky have decided to conspire with each other. Clouds press low against slate-gray waves that rise and fall in growing peaks, and the air has a thickness to it, a fresh musk that I can almost taste. I want to dive back down, to ignore the growing storm and the havoc it will bring, but it is then that I spot the sail. A flash of white in the meager light.

A ship.

I bob for a moment, letting myself be carried high by a wave.

Even from far away I can see that the vessel is larger than the one I found before. Its mainsail snaps in the wind as it rocks from side to side.

I swallow as my heart lurches with the sea.

The wind picks up, throwing thin needles of rain that sting my skin. I wait, the heavy wetness of my hair cloaking my shoulders.

Yemoja's words echo in my mind. Honor. It is our honor.

I swim toward the ship, fighting against the strong currents, choosing to slip just under the waves where the rain shatters the surface but doesn't pepper my skin. Sharks glide beneath me, twisting and turning, but I don't pay them any attention, nor they me. I am not what they want.

When I emerge, the wind is sharper, rising with peaked waves that grow to the size of small mountains. The vessel is ahead of me, the curve of its dark hull scoring the surface as it cuts through the water. Faint shouts carry on the wind and I make sure I stay close to the ship, just enough to watch but not to be seen.

And wait.

The day pulls out, clouds and waves whipped together so that it is hard to tell where the sky ends and the sea begins. I keep my position, watching as the waves, shot through with white foam, batter the ship relentlessly, wondering if the mass of shifting water will sink the vessel. Shuddering, I imagine shards of masts and sails and limbs and blood in the sea.

A sudden pull of water draws me closer as a cry rips through the air. Thunder rumbles, followed by lightning that fractures the sky, ripping through the clouds to strike just left of the vessel. The wind brings more shouts as I am caught by another current. I fight it, pulling away from the tug of the deep, staying on the surface, eyes on the ship. There are movements on board, but

I am still too far away to see properly. I hesitate, wanting to be closer, wanting to see. But I know it's too risky so I swim down, just beneath the waves, in reach of the hull.

As muffled shouts filter through the top of the sea, I glide underneath the wooden bottom of the ship. Peppered with barnacles and algae, its length spans only a fraction of the whales I am used to. I plan to surface on the other side of the vessel, but pause when the darkness shifts. The clouds must have parted momentarily, because a large shaft of light splits the water. I start toward it just as the depths are filled with a great crash, bubbles rising and bursting. As the small pockets of air dissipate, I see it.

A body.

Dark brown skin gleaming as it cleaves the layers of the sea.

A boy, a man . . . no, somewhere in between.

I reach out at the same time as he shoots through the water, the ship already speeding on, jettisoned cargo far beneath the waves. Black chains hang from bloodied skin, dragging him down as bubbles continue to pop and rise. I swim up as he sinks, my gaze locked on the pale soles of his feet and then the spread of his fingers. There is pain in every line of his body and I feel it in my heart. I push it aside and focus on him, on honoring his life.

Gently, I cradle a foot, pulling him to me. The chains knock against my side as I curl my arms around the muscles of his stomach. His skin is hot in the cool of the water, and the sea turns pink from his blood.

So much blood.

My heart thuds as our chests press together. His skin matches mine in heat and I know that life must have only just left him. I place my lips next to the shell of his ear, the coils of my black hair brushing against our skin. His body speaks of the sun and of giant

mahogany trees, their flesh a delicate brown beneath the bark. I turn him to face me, my fingers slipping down his ribs as I open my mouth to speak Yemoja's words. But before I can begin, his eyes open, black pupils swallowing the white.

In shock, I shove the boy away from me. He floats backward and into the dark of the sea, clawing at the water.

I was not expecting to find someone alive. I have never found someone alive.

The boy looks at me, his eyes large.

Wide-set brown eyes.

The shade speaks to me. A rich color that reminds me of something . . . of someone. The water surges around me, plucking at the memories, but for once, I yank back.

A midnight-blue wrapper. Stars picked out in rich fabric. The memory is still there. I tease at it as the sea embraces us. A voice as smooth as silk.

Here is a story. Story it is.

The same brown eyes flecked with dark amber and the dot of a beauty mark, too, this one just above a left eyebrow rather than close to lips.

My mother.

Tears escape, instantly joining the sea as a shark glides closer. Instinctively, I reach for the boy's wrists and pull him back to me. Eyes that were open begin to flicker as the last of the air flows from his mouth. He will die if I don't do something. Panic ripples through me and I tighten my grip on him. With a push, I propel us toward the sun that is glittering through the water, wavy with ripples.

A wide smile. Full of joy, of love. I hold on to the recollection, letting it fill me as I swim harder and faster.