



CHAPTER ONE

THE BONES ARE buried deep, white against the velvet of dark water. I shudder in the cold press of the sea as I swim beneath giant rib cages. The chill has burrowed into my core, where it nestles in the pit of my stomach, settling next to the promise I made to Olokun. The promise I must keep, even though it colors my days in shades of midnight, of misery. Sometimes I let myself think of the sun, the perfect pink-and-orange rise of it, the fire of the way it sets. But then my mind always goes to Kola and the heat of his skin, the slice of his smile, and the way one touch can make my chest tight.

My choice.

My sacrifice.

I blink away curls from my eyes, trying to rid myself of thoughts that only make the lightless water harder to bear. Release them, I tell myself. Release what you cannot have and accept the present.

I adjust my grip on the terra-cotta pot I found resting in the sand, an offering from above that made its way down to the deep. At least I will be able to bring evidence that *someone* still worships Olokun. Flicking my caudal fin, its blush-and-gold pleats barely

visible, I pass slowly under the last of the skeletons, their ivory arcs protruding from the silt.

When I emerge from the bones, I pause for a moment in water that grows warmer. The heat is a balm, and I spin once in the hot silk of a current, almost smiling at the relief it brings. Almost.

Ahead, on either end of the coral reef, the earth is split, emitting searing gases that bubble into the sea. A blue glow spreads over my skin as I draw closer to a large carved opening lit up by firefly squid. Smaller seeps of gases cause the water to shimmer and glitter, feverish swirls that escape, framing the entrance in the coral. The squid illuminate an archway draped with luminous sea moss and studded with mollusks.

I swallow thickly. The soft light makes my heart ache with its gentle beauty, but it's only a pale imitation of what I crave. Six months without the scald of a full sun and I find it hard to imagine the feel of sweat sliding down warm skin. I want air, even though I don't need it, even when it is dense with a coming storm or cut through with the chill of night. I want to see the stars again, their scattered flares puncturing the sky. I want to feel the earth beneath my feet, the rich black soil that turns to soft mud when the rains come.

Floating closer to the entrance, I run a finger over the etchings of fish, whales, and the peaks of the seabed. The last image is one of scales, curls, and the telltale beauty of Yemoja. My maker, my second mother, the most gracious of orisas. A sadness coils within me, but I don't let it take root. Instead, I focus on Yemoja's safety, on Folasade and the other Mami Wata, fulfilling their task of gathering the souls of those who die in the sea. If I hadn't asked Olokun for help, then the fracturing world would have broken entirely.

I am here so that they can be safe. And this is the price I must pay.

I touch the sapphire at my neck, its cold blue brighter than the rock around me. I think of blessing souls with Yemoja, honoring their journeys home to Olodumare. A different kind of service from the one that Olokun demands of me now.

But my choices were the right ones, and they don't change what needs to be done. I grasp the pot tighter and glide through the gases, chin tipped up, shoulders back. More warm water flows over me as I pass under the arch, giving way to much cooler currents when I emerge into a tunnel that stretches ahead. No firefly squid here.

My heart beats quicker, and I hold a cold hand to my chest. This part used to scare me, but months of making this journey now allows me to swim through the passage with faith, though there is still a slither of dread in knowing what awaits. I slip into the gloom, skin grazing the smooth black sides as I head toward the vague light in the distance.

The rock widens into a circular space. Hundreds of larger firefly squid are draped over the coral walls, their glow reflecting on the iridescent insides of cracked-open shells studded among them. The moss grows in abundance here, its thick glistening arcs looped around the walls. I squint through the dazzle of light, eyes narrowed against the sudden brightness.

A current tugs me farther inside and I let it, clasping the offering to my chest, allowing myself a glance upward at a ceiling peppered with more moss, its trails pulsing with soft white lights.

"I see that you have decided to grace me with your presence." The deep voice trickles out from the back of the hall, where the

light stretches to reach. I feel a faint flicker of pride when I don't flinch.

A flash of a metallic gaze, and then Olokun leans forward, his mouth curled up at the edges. I swim toward the murkiness until I can make out the coil of the orisa's great tail curved beneath him. Olokun sits on a black coral throne, fingers curling over the arm-rests. He flicks his abede back and forth, the silver fan creating ripples in the water. Shadows cloak the muscled bulk of Olokun's body, but his eyes shine in a face with sharp angles. A thick golden chain wraps around his waist, its end tailing off into the sea.

"It's not yet time," I answer, the words slipping out like stones settling around us. The pot is cool in my arms, and I grip its handles firmly, teeth clenched so tight that my jaw aches. I want to remind the orisa of what I gave up to be here, but I bite it down.

Setting the vessel before Olokun, I touch my fingertips and forehead to the seafloor as a sign of respect before moving backward. The orisa's cape trails down to the sand and stones, black pearls bulbous and gleaming.

Olokun peers at the clay pot, a finger held against the cleft in his chin. "What is that?"

"An offering," I say, hands hovering over the tribute. "Shall I open it?"

"Let me." The water swirls, rocking me slightly as the orisa lunges forward and snatches up the pot.

Olokun wrenches the lid off and reaches inside, bringing out a bundle of waxed cloth, which he slowly unwraps. The whitish belly of the raw yam is exposed. The orisa's smile disappears as he covers the peeled vegetable and places it back inside.

"Another reminder of those who worship you," I say, my annoyance forming at the downward tilt of his lips. I know what

he is thinking—that he will never be able to taste iyán this deep in the sea. Will never be able to dip it into ègúsí, dig his feet into the hot earth, take sips of palm wine between each bite. He finds something lacking in every offering I bring.

Olokun shoves the pot against the wall with the others, and the golden chain around his waist rattles, its links clinking against the throne. He turns his gaze away from the discarded tributes I spent my days searching for, a frown puckering his forehead.

“Are you not pleased?” My voice wavers, the question shooting out before I can swallow it back down.

The orisa doesn’t answer, but he kicks out at the pot this time, sending it crashing against the rock, where it smashes into pieces. I edge backward, welcoming the rise of my anger, using it to keep most of my fear at bay.

“It is not enough. You should be bringing me more. Find more!” Olokun roars, surging from his throne, tall in the glitter and gloom. When I don’t speak, he sits back down, fingers testing each sharp point of his abede. “I do not ask much of you. Searching for tributes, your company at times, and overseeing the dead. These are small things.”

My chest swells with anger. I think of the hours spent combing the bedrock until my fingers are numb, the relief when I do find something, the days when I dread returning empty-handed. The times when thoughts of Kola make me sink to the blackest part of the water, letting the arctic currents wash away my tears, when missing him hurts so much that it burns.

“You will never be sated!” The words fight their way up my throat, and I can’t hold them in. “There’s too much bitterness in your heart. It’s not the people’s fault that you are chained down here, and it certainly isn’t mine!”

Olokun freezes, his abede held high. He slashes it once, twice, through the water, and then looks directly at me, a muscle in his jaw twitching. “If I had been shown proper respect from the beginning, then I would not be trapped down here.”

“You sent wave after wave to destroy Ife!” I answer, a sneer in my voice. Obatala created land in the middle of Olokun’s waters and gave life to humankind. But he did not consult Olokun, whose outrage at his shrunken kingdom and lack of worship grew. Lurking in the depths, the orisa became twisted with spite and jealousy, until he tried to erase the earth and its people by battering them with the sea. “Obatala had to chain you to save humanity. You have no patience. No care. You are here because of what you did!” I glare at him, my frustration taking over. A part of me used to feel some sympathy for Olokun, banished so deep, but his vanity is exhausting. “Was it worth this? The weight of water above us? A life without sunlight, the gnawing cold that eats away at your bones?” This is the most I have ever said, and I brace myself for his fury, my hands in fists.

The gentle swish of water is the only sound in the chamber. I hold Olokun’s gaze in a way I never have, my heart thumping.

“You made your choice, and now you dare to complain?” Olokun’s voice is low, laced with menace. He snaps his fan shut and swims over to me, his eyes as icy as the water that presses down around us. “Tell me, did I force you to come to these depths?” I stare at the orisa, swallowing down more words, my shoulders quivering. “You offered me your service. I did not demand it from you, Mami Wata.” His words are soft, winding through the water like ribbons. “The anger and pity that you feel are for yourself. Remember this and show your *respect*.”

His last word catches at me. Olokun stood by his promise to help bind Esu, thereby saving those I care about. That deserves my deference, even if his past actions do not.

“Besides . . .” Olokun swims close enough for me to make out the twists of his short curls. “Do I not show compassion now?”

My shoulders slump, and my spine curves over once again. I think of what is expected of me next, and I nod. It doesn’t matter how I feel—we must do what needs to be done. *I must do what needs to be done.*

“We will put your outburst down to tiredness and the cold,” says Olokun, flicking the chain behind him. His eyes are shuttered now, any displeasure consumed by the silver and black. “Come.”

The last shreds of my anger dissipate as Olokun turns to leave, his tail a sinuous slink of purple. Behind the throne is another tunnel, and with a flick of his fin, Olokun disappears within it. Quickly, I follow.

The passageway splits off into a dozen others, some to areas I have never seen. Before long, we are outside and swimming into lighter water, the frigid depths bringing a numbness that seeps inside me. Olokun soars upward out of the black blue, skimming along the reef, golden chain trailing in his wake, seemingly infinite but never long enough for him to reach the surface. I track the glints of metal, swimming faster, chest tightening with every stroke I make.

We are close.

Olokun doesn’t look back at me, so he won’t see the glaze of tears, but as I move nearer to him, I can see his lips are pulled tight, chin held up.

“There are . . . more. This much I know from what the squid have told me.” Olokun’s words are cushioned in the indigo satin of the water.

I close my eyes and nod once, and then I am propelling myself up, drawing level with the orisa as we crest the reef.

Before us stretch the burial sands. The half-moon curve of pale silt spreads out as far as I can see, its surface littered with mounds that range from whale-sized to smaller than me. I swallow, heart beating faster as I make out the new bodies.

All who die in the sea end up here in Olokun’s kingdom.

“Another òyìnbó ship?” I ask quietly, squeezing my words around the lump in my throat.

Olokun keeps his eyes on the people who have come to rest in his realm. Slowly he nods his great head, caudal fin waving in the water. Together, we scoop the silt from the bottom of the sea, covering each hand, each foot, smoothing sand over open mouths and sightless eyes. Burying the people who were taken, who could not be saved. I tuck wrappers over chests, touching a hand to scarred cheeks and tangled hair. I cry as we create new graves. Every time, it tears at me, and every time the pain grows until I think I can’t take any more.

Once we are finished, we return to the reef, silent as our gazes sweep over the dead. My hands form fists, nails digging in, breaking the skin of my palms. Small crescent wounds and bursts of blood are spawned, only to dissolve instantly.

“Before, you and your sisters gathered their souls, and I prayed over the bodies I buried.” Olokun’s eyes fix on the blue of the sapphire hanging around my neck, his words quiet. “Now we bury them and pray together.” He holds out his hand to me. “Keeping their remains safe and blessing them. I know it is a hard

burden to bear, but your service and added prayers are an honor to the dead, Mami Wata. Something special. I am glad to be able to offer them that, not just the actions and words of an orisa who seeks redemption.”

I look down at his large palm, with its faded brown lines. My anger is gone, replaced with the melancholy that now accompanies me everywhere. I slide my fingers over his, intertwining bones and flesh, letting him pull me next to him. I am grateful that I can offer the last words over these stolen people, that we give them more dignity.

“A ɕe ẹrí nípa pé a rí ibi à ti sùn yín, a dẹ ɕe iwúre pé kí irìn àjò yín sí ọdọ Olódùmarè jẹ irìn àjò ìbùkún.” We look down together as the prayer streams from our lips. “Ara yín á tún áyé wá; ẹmi yín á sì jẹ ọkan pẹlú àwọn alálẹ. Pẹlú àwọn ọrọ wọn yí, a gbée yín pọn. A ò sì ní gbàgbé ìgbésí aiyé yín.”

I don’t cry anymore. Instead, I try to think of the lives they lived and the peace they have now.

“We witness your final resting place, and we add our blessings to your journey home to Olodumare,” I murmur again as Olokun releases my hand. “Your body will rejoin the world, while your spirit will be at one with the ancestors. With these words we honor you and your life. Your death will not be forgotten.”

The orisa gazes at the mounds, large and small, before he turns away, his tail propelling him through the dark. I do not follow—I know by now that he will not speak. He will meditate on the loss of life that the tides bring to his realm.

I shut my eyes and try to calm the tremble in my hands. Still, I can’t stop the darkness that pulses against my closed lids. I’ve helped bury them, have spoken the prayer, but if I do not feel this pain, then who will? I think of how I could have been in one of

these graves if Yemoja had not remade me. Despite yearning to be human, I was given another chance at a different kind of life. One that I should still be thankful for.

I slide my arms around my waist, but I am too cold to offer myself any comfort. Instead, I clutch at the jewel of my necklace and think about the souls of the people I gathered. Those golden and silver threads of life, their memories, echoes of their joy. I imagine their ghosts rising up from the silt, brushing sand from remnants of patterned wrappers, out of the whorls of their ears and the blackness of their hair. They will look around them, at the heavy layers of the water above and the maw of the deep just outside Olokun's kingdom, and they will wonder what happened, where they are. And then realization will crash down on them—their life, their death—and just when they think they cannot stand it, the ghosts will regard the bodies we have buried. Some will crumple in despair, while others will make fists of their vague fingers, smashing them against chests that no longer rise and fall, pressing against hearts that no longer beat. A fury felt even beyond life.

My lips flatten into a line. I will the ghosts in my mind to follow their souls and return home, to welcome the embrace of Olo-dumare. I send my apologies to them, clasping a hand to my own breast, fingers splayed over a heart that still beats, even though it feels shattered and cracked by loss.

Then the water rushes in a sudden current. Fear, as quick and vivid as a sea snake, darts in. I sway, bursts of ghosts still blooming on my eyelids, as small icy fingers slide around my wrist.



CHAPTER TWO

I OPEN MY eyes to a hand clutching my arm, skin pinched between slim brown fingers. My first thought is that the ghosts have somehow made their claim on the living, have come to warn me that they are still here. My heart skips at the hard grip, and then I look up and see not a wraith but a halo of black hair and full cheeks.

Folasade. The sapphire in her necklace glows an icy blue, matching the one at my throat, a sign that I am one of seven.

My breath loosens, but my chest is still taut. Pulling her to me, I wrap my arm around her, my own hand now clutching at chilled flesh, the soft tips of her tight black curls sliding against my forehead.

“Folasade,” I gasp, squeezing her tighter so that I can feel the beat of her heart against mine. I hold her, keeping her anchored to me, mind still working over the fact that she is here. And then my joy is slit by a sudden flood of anxiousness.

Folasade should not be this deep.

After Yemoja left the river Ogun to follow the first stolen people across the ocean, she made a truce with Olokun—she would gather their souls to return home and he would honor

their bodies, saying the last prayers over their flesh and bone and showing respect at their final resting place. Each orisa carved out their territory, with Yemoja's being the top part of the sea and Olokun's being the very bottom. Since Olokun had no choice in this, being bound to the dark depths, he was adamant that Yemoja—and, by extension, Mami Wata—not intrude on the Land of the Dead.

I risked Olokun's wrath when I sought his help in defeating Esu. Now I am paying the price in the cold dark, and Folasade has followed me here.

"Simidele, I'm glad I've found you." She pulls away and manages to aim her smile at me. Uneasiness creases the corners of her mouth as she takes me in. "Are you well? You seem . . ."

But Folasade doesn't finish, doesn't need to. I know what the weeks and months have done to me. My skin is dull and my spine curves over, weighted with longing for the surface. For the light, warm air, and white-tipped waves. For Yemoja and the other Mami Wata.

For Kola.

My heart stutters at the thought of him, recalling the scent of black soap and the brownish pink of his bottom lip. It has been so long, but I can still bring Kola's face to mind, the cut of his cheekbones and the slide of his smooth skin under the palms of my hands. An ache stretches through me when I remember the pureness in the golden twists of his soul, spiraling back into his body after my prayers and the twins' powers took hold.

At times like these, it feels as if there is no room inside me for anything else but him. Memories of the crinkle of his eyes when he would smile, the frown that would crease his forehead if he thought my feet hurt. Imaginings of what could have been.

But these are cruel ways of punishing myself. Even if I hadn't bartered my freedom for Olokun's realm, Mami Wata can never be with a human. I bring my hands to my face, pressing cold fingertips to my cheeks.

"Simi?" Folasade peers at me intently, worry lines forming between her eyebrows.

Focus on the present, I tell myself, lowering my hands and shoving the memories of Kola away, knowing that they will crowd back in. They always do.

"Why are you here, Folasade?" I whisper. I look around us, searching for the bobbing lights of anglerfish or the giant squid whose limbs seem long enough to reach the surface if they wished. Either would slink back to Olokun to tell him of the intruder.

Folasade squeezes my hand, a small smile trembling on her lips. I think of how she would lecture me about the ways of Mami Wata, so pious in her manner of serving Yemoja. She should not be here, I think again. Not just because it's dangerous for her, but also because it would have been easier if she hadn't come, reminding me of what I am. What I had before. It would have been easier if I didn't have to see any Mami Wata at all.

"I came to see how you are." Folasade moves closer, but her words waver, and I know there is something else. Fear is sown in the tense quick glances she takes, in the hunched set of her shoulders and the small groove between her eyebrows. "Yemoja has been worried. We all have."

I try to smile but only end up baring my teeth. I should tell Folasade to leave now, but the selfish part of me, the lonely part of me, doesn't want to. Instead, I take her hand, drawing her along behind me, moving quickly over the ridge of the reef.

“Come,” I say. Folasade’s fingers clutch at mine as she sees the tombs of silt and sand, and I can feel the bend of her body, the turn of her head as she keeps the dead in view until we swim down, heading deeper into the water.

The hue of the sea changes as the current reaches for us, its freezing swirl yanking us down to the darker part of the water. I relax into its pull, holding on to Folasade as we land on chilled sand with a gentle bump.

“Olokun will be resting after prayers,” I say. Black tides all but consume the shipwreck, but I know where its rotting timbers rest and I lead us toward it, using the dip of the seabed and familiar shapes of rocks to guide our way. “And even if he weren’t, this is the last place he would come.”

There are certain reminders of humankind that Olokun doesn’t like, and any evidence of their presumptuousness in trying to claim even a part of the sea turns his mood darker than the deep. The *òyìnbó* vessels he hates most of all, curses spilling from lips twisted with rage whenever there are new ones. Ships of strangers that come from other lands to pillage ours, sowing discord and stealing people, whom they treat worse than animals. There have been more and more wrecks recently. If there are any of the stolen people inside, the orisa retrieves their bodies and takes them to the burial sands. But Olokun enjoys leaving the *òyìnbó* to rot, their bones slowly turning white in the scouring tides of the sea. For this, I rejoice. It is all they deserve.

The wreck lies on its side, one mast leaning into the darkness, the other missing, carried by currents into other realms. The tatter of one long-ago white sail undulates in the water, and a ragged hole in the hull is a darker shade of black, an obsidian

maw. Anger bubbles back up within me, the only thing of heat in such cold depths. How can they treat people in such a way? To deny them their humanity, treat them as if they are the same as spices and fabrics, and then cast aside their bodies as if they are nothing more than unwanted possessions? Even when our kingdoms war, any prisoners captured are still . . . *people*.

I sink down to the seabed, level with the gaping hole in the ship. The first time I came to the hold, the heavy manacles and cramped quarters reminded me not only of the pain and fear the people have felt but of my own on board such a vessel. A bleak fury wound its way through me, and I ripped the iron restraints from the rotting wood.

The hold is now empty of anything but barrels, the kola nuts, pepper, and turmeric they stored long dissolved. A touch on my wrist lets me know Folasade is still following me, and together we swim inside, taking care not to let the splintered edges snag our skin. We skim through the absent deck and head toward the only door that remains, its brass hinges dull now, a patina of green replacing their shine. My fingers curl around the cold handle, pulling until the rotting door opens, allowing us to slip through.

The same luminous sea moss clings to the slats of the floor and walls, giving enough of a glow for us to see the opulence of the captain's cabin. Dark brocade curtains wave gently in the water. The back end is a long shattered window, once open to the horizon, now wedged tightly against the sand and bedrock. I move past a desk tipped on its side, carved legs exposed, floating next to the chair. My fingers brush its back, disturbing the disintegrating shreds of silk.

There are no bones here, no reminders of the òyìnbó who

once commanded this ship. I always wonder who the captain was, how his conscience allowed him to pack people in among spices and ivory.

Folasade glances about her, taking in the bedchamber, a small niche in the side of the cabin. Pale slivers of curtains obscure the lumpy pallet, but the twist of sheets can just about be seen, weighed down by a pair of long leather boots, now covered in lichen. Folasade shudders and spins around so that we are face to face.

“It’s the only place Olokun will not find you,” I say, my voice strained.

Folasade doesn’t answer, but her eyes flick over me as she reaches out, taking a small pearl from my hair. She examines the gleaming orb before closing her hand around it. “Yemoja worries for you. I came to see how you are.”

“I am . . . fine.” I have to be, I think as I push away the curls that float across my face. “Tell her she doesn’t need to worry. This was my choice and I will honor it.” Pausing, I tear off a strip of fabric from the chair, thinking of Yemoja’s fierce embrace, of the curve of her smile.

“How did you come to such an . . . agreement with Olokun?” Folasade’s head leans on one side as she examines me.

“How could I have bound Esu? I’m not powerful enough to do that. It’s all I could think about as we headed to his island.” I swim toward the back of the cabin. “I saw from the map on the babalawo’s walls where Olokun could be found.”

“And you asked him to help?”

“Olokun was furious at being left in the deep. Esu had not passed on any of his messages of regret to Olodumare.” I stare out the broken window and imagine the sights it once held. Dawn.

That first flush of delicate light that dusts your skin and gilds the world. The time of day I miss the most. I sigh and turn away. My life is not marked by the rise and fall of the sun here; all I have is the tides to measure the days and weeks. “He agreed to help me if I shared his burden in burying the dead.”

“And you accepted.” Folasade frowns at me, thick eyebrows slashed above her brown eyes. “Olokun tried to drown humanity. And now you are down here with him.”

I think of the darkness and the icy bite of cold. I don’t want Folasade or any of the other Mami Wata to worry even more about me. Pushing back my shoulders, I hold Folasade’s gaze.

“Olokun is honoring his truce with Yemoja, and I am honoring my bargain with him,” I say. “We bury the dead and deliver their final prayers.”

“Of course.” Folasade grips the chair in front of her, staring back at me. “But if it’s redemption that he’s seeking, only Obatala can absolve him.”

“I know.”

Folasade watches me still, but I look away. There’s no use in going over what has been agreed. When I promised Olokun I would serve him in return for his help in defeating Esu, it was the right thing to do.

It is the right thing.

If Olokun hadn’t helped me bind Esu, then the trickster would have gained more power, using it to control orisas and all human-kind, bending them to his will.

“What does Mother Yemoja think? Of me being here?” These are questions I have asked myself, and my stomach roils as I say them out loud. Does the orisa think I’ve betrayed her once again?

Folasade tucks the pearl back into my curls, letting her fingers

trail down my cheek. “She mourns you.” I nod, sorrow darting through me. “You know that she admires your bravery and sacrifice. She just wishes . . .”

“What?” I say. I try to ignore the pulse of my heart as it rises in my throat. “What does she wish?”

“That things could have been different.” Folasade’s fingertips brush against my collarbone, her eyes holding mine. “She worries over the pain of your choice. The darkness that you live in. And so do I.”

I pull back, taking a moment to blink away my tears, thinking of the determined metallic gaze of Yemoja. The ferocity of her love in creating Mami Wata, and the devotion and care she shows to humankind.

“She says that she understands your choice. That you will always be her daughter. No matter what.” Folasade moves closer to me, her scales violet blue. “She asked me to tell you that she hopes one day you will be able to come back to us.”

“I thought she might be angry,” I whisper. I hold a hand to my heart, relief flooding through me.

Folasade shakes her head. “Mother Yemoja is furious only over the loss of you.” She peers out the empty window, shuddering. “But this is not where you belong. You were not made for burials and prayers over bodies.” Folasade purses her lips as she faces me again, leaning forward, cupping the sapphire around my throat, the one that matches hers, the one that all seven Mami Wata wear. “You should be with us, gathering souls.”

I snatch my necklace away from her touch. “Don’t you think I know this? That I wish I could still see the sun, Mother Yemoja—” My voice cracks and I pause for a moment, the shiver of my chest

shaking more words free. “I had no choice but to seek Olokun’s help, Folasade. Kola would have died. Bem, the twins, all of Oko—”

“Just as you had no choice when you saved Kola from the sea?”

I draw back, hissing as if she has burned me. She might as well have. “I would never have left anybody to die! Not if they could be saved.”

Silence grows between us. My outburst is swallowed by the gloom of the wreck, but I still can’t look at Folasade.

“I know you wanted to help,” says Folasade finally, her voice softer now. “I know you did what you thought was best, but—”

“No!” I say. “I’m sorry that I’m not able to do what Yemoja created me for, but she has six others still. I won’t be made to feel guilty. Not after everything I’ve done and all I’ve given up. It’s a shame that Yemoja understands but you don’t.” Pushing past her, I yank open the door, shaking with the grief I normally keep carefully tucked away. “If you’ve come here just to tell me everything I have done wrong, then you should leave.”

As I swim back through the ragged hole, the splintered edges catch against my shoulder. I wince but the scratch only takes seconds to heal, and then I am rushing through the water, pushing my way toward the reef.

“Simidele! Wait!” calls Folasade behind me. “I’m sorry. I came to give voice to Yemoja. . . .”

But I don’t listen. The months of being this deep crush against me and I press a palm against the thump of my heart. Seeing Folasade was a welcome relief, but now her presence and her criticism shape the ache that stretches across my chest. I need to get away. From the deep and the reminders of my failures. I swim hard against a sudden current, upward, cresting the rock barrier