



BEASTS OF PREY

AYANA GRAY

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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*Dedicated to the roots of the tree from which
a flower blossomed.*

MAP

T/K

MAP

T/K

MAP 2

T/K

MAP 2

T/K

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

ADIAH

Baba says only wicked things happen after midnight, but I know better.

I hold my breath, relieved the front door doesn't creak as I nudge it open and relish the evening breeze on my skin. This late its scent is distinct, a sharp blend of ozone and pine. I glance over my shoulder. In the next room, my parents are fast asleep; Mama's snores are gentle, my father's thunderous. It's easy to envision them, two brown bodies curled against each other under a threadbare blanket, both worn out from a hard day's work in the harvesting fields. I don't want to wake them. Perhaps in the repose of their dreams, their daughter is different, a responsible girl instead of one who sneaks out. Sometimes, I wish I *was* that responsible girl. I hesitate a second longer before slipping into the embrace of night.

Outside, the air is temperate, the rolling gray clouds overhead thick with the promise of monsoon season, but Lkossa remains a city bathed in silver moonlight, more than enough for me. I weave through its empty roads, darting between the flickers of scone-lit streets, and pray I don't run into one of the patrolling Sons of the

Six. It isn't likely I'd get in trouble if the city's anointed warriors caught me, but they'd almost certainly make me turn back, and I don't want to. It's a rare pleasure to walk here without whispers following in my wake, and there's another reason not to be sent home yet: Dakari is waiting for me.

I note the new cloth banners decorating most of the city as I trek north, braided together in ropes of green, blue, and gold—green for the earth; blue for the sea; gold for the gods. Some hang limp from laundry lines as thin and worn as thread, others are nailed clumsily to the doors of modest mud-brick homes not so unlike my own. It's an endearing effort. In a few hours, once the dawn breaks anew, citizens will gather to begin their observance of the Bonding, a holy day in which we celebrate our connection to the gods. Vendors will peddle amulets for the reverent, and give away pouches of throwing rice for the children. The recently-appointed Kuhani will offer blessings from the temple, and musicians will fill the streets with their discordant symphony. Knowing Mama, she'll make roasted sweet potatoes drizzled with honey and sprinkled cinnamon, like she always does on special occasions. Baba will probably surprise her with a small gift he saved up for—and she'll probably tell him he shouldn't have. I ignore a small pang in my chest as I think about Tao, wondering if he'll stop by our house like he normally does for holidays. I'm not actually sure he will this time; Tao and I haven't been speaking lately.

The city darkens as I reach its border, a wide dirt clearing a few yards wide that separates Lkossa from the first of the Greater Jungle's towering black pines. They seem to watch my approach with an immemorial regard, as stoic as the goddess said to dwell among them. Not everyone would dare to venture here—some

believe the jungle isn't safe—but I don't mind it. My eyes search the expanse in anticipation, but when I realize I'm alone, I have to quell a fleeting disappointment. Dakari had said to meet him at this exact spot just after midnight, but he's not here. Perhaps he's running late, maybe he's decided not to—

“Songbird.”

My heart stutters in my chest at the familiar nickname, and a dull flush heats my skin despite the evening chill as a figure peels away from one of the nearby pines to step into better light.

Dakari.

It's hard to make out all his details in the night, but my imagination can fill in the gaps just fine. Half his face is dipped in moonlight, tracing along the sharp cut of his jaw, the easy bend in his broad shoulders. He's taller than me, with the lean build of a runner. His golden-brown skin is several shades lighter than mine, and his hair, raven-black, is freshly cut in a top fade. He looks like a god, and—judging by the cocky grin he gives me—he knows it.

In a few confident strides, he closes the gap between us, and the air around me immediately fills with the distinct smell of him: steel and dirt and leather from his apprenticeship in the forges of the Kughushi District. He gives me a once-over, visibly impressed.

“You came.”

“Of course.” I make myself sound at ease. “We said just after midnight, didn't we?”

“We did.” His chuckle is low, almost musical. “So, are you ready to see the surprise?”

“Are you kidding?” My laugh mirrors his own. “I've been waiting for this all day. It had better be worth it.”

“Oh, it is.” Abruptly, his expression turns more serious. “Now,

you have to *promise* to keep this secret. I've never shown anyone else."

This surprises me. Dakari is, after all, attractive and popular; he has lots of friends. Lots of *girl* friends, specifically. "You mean, you haven't shown anyone at all?"

"No," he says quietly. "This is really special to me, and I . . . I guess I've just never really trusted someone else enough to share it."

At once, I straighten, hoping I look mature, like the kind of girl who *can* be trusted. "I won't tell anyone," I whisper. "I promise."

"Good." Dakari winks, gesturing all around us. "Then, without further ado, here it is!"

I wait a beat before frowning, confused. Dakari's arms are extended like he's about to take flight, his expression absolutely jubilant. Clearly, he likes whatever he's seeing, but *I* can't see anything at all.

"Um . . ." After a few more uncomfortable seconds, I break the silence. "Sorry, am I missing something?"

Dakari glances my way, eyes dancing with amusement. "You mean you can't feel it around us, the splendor?"

The moment the words leave his lips, there's a thrum deep in my core. It's like the first pluck of a kora string, and it reverberates through my entire body. And then I understand, of course. Foreigners call it *magic*; my people call it *the splendor*. I can't see it, but I sense it—a great deal of it—moving just beneath the dirt like ripples in a pond. There's far more here than I've ever felt practicing with the other darajas on the temple's lawns.

"How . . . ?" I'm afraid to even move, to disturb whatever this strange wonder is. "How is there so much of it here?"

“It’s a rare, natural occurrence, only happens once a century.” Dakari’s eyes are closed like he’s savoring a forbidden fruit. “This is why the day of the Bonding is so special, Songbird.”

I look around us, astonished. “I thought the Bonding was symbolic, a day of reverence for—”

Dakari shakes his head. “It’s far more than a day for symbolism. In a few hours, an immeasurable amount of splendor will rise to the earth’s surface. The power will be glorious to behold, though I doubt most people will be able to feel it the way *you* can.” He throws me a sly, knowing look. “After all, few darajas are as gifted as you.”

Something pleasant squirms inside me at the compliment. Dakari isn’t like most people in Lkossa. He isn’t scared of me, or of what I can do. He isn’t intimidated by my abilities.

“Close your eyes.” The words are less a command and more an invitation when Dakari says them. “Go on, try it.”

I follow his lead and close my eyes. My bare toes wriggle, and the splendor responds as though it was only waiting for me to make the first move. It tingles as it flows through me, filling me like steeped honeybush tea poured into black porcelain. It’s *divine*.

“Songbird.” In my new darkness, Dakari’s voice is barely audible, but I hear the emotion in it, the *want*. “Open your eyes.”

I do, and the breath leaves my body.

Concentrated particles of the splendor are floating around us, sparkling like diamonds turned to dust. I feel a million of their tiny pulses in the air, and in the moment their collective heartbeat finds my own, I also feel a distinct sense of connection to them. The red dirt at my feet shifts as more of it rises from the ground, dancing up my limbs and seeping into my very bones. A current

of its energy runs the length of me, intoxicating. I instantly crave more of it. Beside me, something tickles my ear. Dakari. I hadn't noticed him moving closer to me. When he leans in and one hand finds the small of my back, I barely resist a shiver.

"Imagine what you could do with this." His fingers interlaced with mine are warm, his lips soft against my cheek. I think of them, so close to my own, and forget how to breathe. "Imagine what you could make people *see* with this kind of power. You could show everyone that the splendor isn't dangerous, just misunderstood. You could prove they were wrong about everything, about *you*."

You could prove they were wrong. I swallow, remembering. The memories come in an onslaught—the brothers of the temple and their scoldings, the children who run when they see me, the gossiping elders. I think of Mama and Baba back home in their bed, fast asleep. My parents love me, I know, but even they whisper to each other when they think I'm not listening. Everyone is afraid of me and of what I can do, but Dakari . . . He isn't afraid. He's believed in me all along. He's been the first person to really see all of me. In his eyes, I'm not a girl to be chastised, but a woman to be respected. He understands me, he *gets* me, he loves me.

I love *him*.

The splendor before us has taken clearer shape now, forming a towering column of white-gold light that seems to stretch into a realm beyond the sky. It emits a low hum. I could touch it if I reached out. I start to, when—

"Adiah!"

A different voice fractures the peace—one full of fear—and I tear my gaze away from the splendor. Dakari's hand tightens

around mine, but I pull away and search the clearing around us until I find a skinny boy in a dirt-smudged tunic. His short dreadlocks are bed-tousled and he's standing yards away with the city at his back, holding his knees like he's been running. I didn't see him arrive, and I don't know how long he's been here. His eyes are wide with horror. He knows me, and I know him.

Tao.

"Adiah." My best friend doesn't call me Songbird—he uses my real name. His voice is hoarse, desperate. "Please, don't touch it. It's . . . it's dangerous."

Tao loves me too, and in a way I love him back. He is smart and funny and kind. He's been like a brother to me all my life. I hate hurting him. I hate that we haven't been speaking.

"I—" Something catches in my throat, and Tao's words echo in the space between us. *Dangerous*. He doesn't want me to touch the splendor because he thinks it's dangerous. He thinks *I'm* dangerous, just like everyone else does. But he doesn't understand, he doesn't get it. Dakari hasn't said anything, but now *his* voice fills my head.

You could prove they were wrong.

I realize I can, and I *will*.

"I'm sorry." The words leave me, but they're swallowed by the sudden roar of the splendor. The column has grown bigger and louder; it drowns out Tao's reply. I watch the light of it illuminate his face, the tears on his cheeks, and try to ease that same pang in my chest. My friend knows I've made my choice. Perhaps it doesn't matter now, but I hope one day he'll forgive me.

I close my eyes again as my fingers reach to brush the closest

fragments of the splendor. This time, at my touch, they course through my veins in an eager, heady rush. My eyes open wide as they consume me, the wonder of it so enthralling that I barely register the pain until it's too late.

And then, the world is lost to me.



PART ONE

**A ROARING
LION
KILLS
NO PREY.**

CHAPTER 1

GOOD SPIRITS

The hut reeked of death.

It was a nauseating smell, both fetid and sickly sweet, thick in the dusk as it filled Koffi's lungs. A quarter hour had passed since she'd last moved; her legs were stiff, her mouth dry. Every so often, her stomach twisted, threatening revolt. But it was no matter; she kept still as stone. Her eyes were fixed on what lay mere feet from her across the worn dirt floor—the victim.

The boy's name was Sahel. Koffi hadn't worked with him in the Night Zoo long, but she recognized his bare face, mahogany brown like her own, framed by tight black curls. In life, he'd had a crooked smile, an obnoxious braying laugh not unlike that of a donkey. Those things had abandoned him in death. She studied his lanky frame. As was Gede practice, most of his body was shrouded, but dried blood still stained the white linen in places, hints of the gruesome wounds beneath. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there—the scratches, the *bite marks*. From the darkest corners of her mind, a chilling image grew vivid. She imagined Sahel stumbling through a jungle, clumsy, oblivious to what waited for

him among the vines. She envisioned a grotesque creature stalking forward in the moonlight, tongue darting between serrated teeth as it eyed easy prey.

She heard the scream.

A violent shudder racked her body then, despite the muggy heat. If the rumors she'd heard earlier were true, Sahel's manner of death had been neither a quick nor a painless affair.

"Kof."

Across the stuffy hut, Mama was on her knees beside Sahel's body, staring at the tattered blanket before it. On it were six crudely carved wooden figurines of animals—a heron, a crocodile, a jackal, a serpent, a dove, and a hippo—one familiar for each god. The oil lamp to her right bathed one side of her face in lambent light; the other was cast in shadow. "It's time."

Koffi hesitated. She'd agreed to come here and offer parting rites for Sahel, as Gede custom called for, but the thought of getting any closer to the corpse unnerved her. At a sharp glance from Mama, however, she moved to kneel with her. Together they folded their hands, letting their fingers brush each of the figurines.

"Carry him." Mama whispered the prayer. "Carry him to his ancestors in the godlands."

Their heads were still bowed when Koffi asked the question in a murmur. "Is it true?"

Mama cracked a wary eye. "Koffi . . ."

"Some of the others were talking," Koffi went on before her mother could stop her. "They said others were killed, that—"

"*Hush.*" Mama's head snapped up, and she swatted the words away like tsetse flies. "Mind your tongue when you speak of the dead, lest you bring them misfortune."

Koffi pursed her lips. It was said that, to pass into the next life, one of the gods' animal familiars—represented by the figurines before them—carried each soul to the god of death, Fedu. Each soul then had to pay Fedu before being carried on to paradise in the godlands. A soul with no money to pay for passage was doomed to walk the earth as a lost spirit for all eternity. Like Koffi, Sahel had been a beastkeeper indentured to the Night Zoo, which meant he'd had little money in life, and likely had even less in death. If faith held true, this meant his misfortunes had only just begun, whether she minded her tongue or not. She had started to say so when the hut's straw-thatch door opened. A stout woman with salt-and-pepper cornrows stuck her head inside. Her simple tunic was identical to theirs, gray and hemmed just below the knee. At the sight of them, she wrinkled her nose.

"Time to go."

Mama gestured to the figurines. "We're not finished—"

"You've had ample time for this nonsense." The woman waved a dismissive hand. She spoke Zamani, the language of the East, like them, but her Yaba dialect gave her words a sharp, clicking quality. "The boy's dead, praying to toys won't change that, and there's work yet to be done before the show, which Baaz expects to begin on time."

Mama gave a resigned nod. Together, she and Koffi stood, but once the woman had left again, they both looked back to Sahel. If not for the bloodied shroud, he could have been sleeping.

"We'll return and finish our prayers later, before they bury him," said Mama. "He deserves that much."

Koffi tugged at her tunic's frayed neckline, trying to temper a moment's guilt. Everyone else in the Night Zoo had already offered

prayers for Sahel, but she'd begged Mama to wait. She'd blamed chores, then a headache, but the truth was she hadn't wanted to see Sahel like this, broken and hollow and devoid of all the things that had made him real. She'd built her own kind of walls to protect her from the near-constant reminders of death's presence here, but it had crept in anyway, intruding. Now the idea of leaving Sahel to lie here in the dirt, as alone as he'd been in the last grisly seconds of his life, unsettled her. She thought again of what she'd heard other beastkeepers whispering earlier in the day. People were now saying that Sahel had waited until late last night to make a run for it. They said he'd gone into the Greater Jungle hoping to find freedom and instead had found a creature that killed for amusement. She winced. The Shetani's murderous reputation was frightening enough, but it was the fact that the monster had evaded capture for so many years that set her on edge. Misunderstanding the look on her face, Mama took Koffi's hand and squeezed.

"I promise we'll come back," she whispered. "Now come on, let's go." Without another word, she ducked out of the hut. Koffi glanced back at Sahel's body a final time, then followed.

Outside, the sun was setting, cast against a bruised sky curiously fractured by strange black fissures amid the clouds. Those fissures would fade to a gentler violet as monsoon season drew nearer, but they'd never truly disappear. They'd been there all Koffi's life, an indelible mark left by the Rupture.

She hadn't been alive a century ago when it had happened, but elders deep in their palm wine still spoke of it on occasion. Drunk, voices slurred, they recalled the violent tremors that had splintered the earth like a clay pot, the dead who'd strewn Lkossa's streets in the aftermath. They talked of a relentless, blistering heat that

had driven men mad. Koffi had suffered the consequences of that madness. After the Rupture, her people—the Gedes—had been dwindled down by war and poverty, easy to divide and regulate. Her eyes traveled along the cracks in the sky, weaving overhead like thin black threads. For a second, she thought she felt something as she surveyed them . . .

“Koffi!” Mama called over her shoulder. “Come now!”

Just as quickly, the feeling was gone, and Koffi kept on.

In silence, she and Mama whisked by mud-brick huts crammed along the Night Zoo’s edge; other beastkeepers were getting ready too. They passed men and women dressed in shabby tunics, some nursing freshly bandaged wounds from encounters with beasts, some marked by more permanent injuries like old scars and missing fingers. Each carried a quiet defeat in their hunched shoulders and downcast eyes that Koffi hated, but understood. Most of the Night Zoo’s workers were of the Gedezi People like her, which meant the show would go on this evening, but Sahel’s absence would be felt. He hadn’t had real family here, but he’d been one of them, bound to this place by bad luck and bad choices. He deserved more than quick prayers in a run-down hut; he deserved a proper burial with token coins to ensure he made it to the godlands. But no one here could afford to spare any coin. Baaz made sure of that.

A chorus of shrieks, roars, and snarls filled the eventide as they reached the crooked wooden post marking the end of the beastkeeper’s huts, trading red dirt for an expanse of green lawns filled with cages of every size, shape, and color. Koffi eyed the one nearest her, and the eight-headed nyuvwira snake met her gaze, curious. She followed Mama’s lead around cages of white pygmy elephants, chimpanzees, a pair of giraffes grazing quietly in their

paddock. They passed a dome-shaped aviary full of black-and-white impundulus, barely mindful to cover their heads as the birds beat their massive wings and sent sparks of lightning into the sky. Baaz Mtombé's Night Zoo was rumored to hold over a hundred exotic species within its confines; in her eleven years of contracted service to it, Koffi had never bothered to count.

They moved quickly between other enclosures, but when they reached the grounds' border, her steps slowed. The blacksteel cage kept here was separate from the others, and with good reason. In the dying light, only its stark silhouette was visible; what it contained within was veiled in shadow.

"It's all right." Mama beckoned even as Koffi instinctively faltered. "I checked on Diko earlier today, and he was fine." She approached the cage at the same time something in its corner shifted. Koffi tensed.

"Mama—"

"Njoo sasa, Diko, come now." Mama kept her voice low as she withdrew a rust-speckled key from her pocket to insert into the massive padlock. There was an ominous hiss, slick as a blade. Koffi's toes curled in the grass, and from the cage's shadows a beautiful creature emerged.

His body was reptilian and sinewed, entirely adorned by iridescent scales that seemed to hold a thousand colors captive each time he moved. Clever citrine eyes danced back and forth as Mama tinkered with the lock, and when the beast flicked his forked black tongue between the bars, a smell like smoke tinged the dry air. Koffi swallowed.

The first time she'd seen a jokomoto, as a little girl, she'd thought they were creatures spun from glass, fragile and delicate. She'd been

wrong. There was nothing delicate about a fire-breathing lizard.

“Get the hasira leaf out,” Mama directed. “Now.”

At once, Koffi pulled three dry, silver-veined leaves from a drawstring pouch at her hip. They were exquisite, shimmering with white resin that left her fingertips sticky when she pinched them. Her heartbeat hammered as the door to the jokomoto’s cage swung open and his head swiveled. Mama covered her nose with one hand, then raised the other in warning.

“Steady . . .”

Koffi went stock-still as the jokomoto bolted from his cage and slunk toward her on long clawed feet. She waited until he was within a few yards of her before tossing the leaves high into the air. Diko’s eyes caught them, and he lunged, impossibly quick. There was a flash of pointed teeth, a merciless crunch, and then they were gone. Koffi stuffed her hands back into her pockets quickly. Jokomotos weren’t native to this part of Eshōza; they were creatures from the western part of the continent, said to be children of Tyembu, the desert god. At roughly the same size as a common monitor lizard, Diko wasn’t the largest, fastest, or strongest animal kept in the Night Zoo, but he *was* the most temperamental—which also made him the most dangerous. One wrong move and he could set the entire place ablaze; it was all too easy to recall the nasty burns on beastkeepers who’d forgotten that. Her heartbeat only settled after the hasira leaf’s power took effect and his eyes lost some of their lurid yellow glow.

“I’ve got it from here.” Koffi was already moving behind Diko with a leather harness and leash snatched from a nearby post. She stooped down, and the moment she fastened its worn straps under his scaled belly and tightened them, she relaxed. The flimsy binds

were a silly thing to take comfort in—they'd do nothing if Diko's mood soured—but he was subdued, at least for now.

"Make sure those binds are secure."

Koffi looked up. "Done."

Pleased, Mama bent to give Diko's snout a demonstrative pat. "That's a good boy."

Koffi rolled her eyes as she straightened. "I don't know why you talk to him like that."

"Why not?" Mama shrugged. "Jokomotos are spectacular beasts."

"They're dangerous."

"Sometimes things that seem dangerous are just misunderstood." Mama said the words with a strange sadness before patting Diko again. This time, as if to prove a point, he gently nudged her palm. This seemed to cheer her back up. "Besides, just look at him. He's in good spirits tonight."

Koffi started to argue, then thought better of it. Her mother had always had a strange empathy for the Night Zoo's inhabitants. She changed the subject.

"You know, that was the last of the hasira leaf." She patted her empty pouch for emphasis. "We're out until more is delivered." Even now, wisps of the leaves' cloying fragrance still suffused the air. Inadvertently, she caught a lingering whiff of it, and a pleasant thrum tickled the edges of her senses.

"Koffi!" Mama's voice turned sharp, cleaving through that momentary bliss. She was still holding Diko's leash, but frowning. "You know better. Don't breathe it in."

Koffi shook herself, unnerved, then fanned at the air around her

until the smell was gone. Plucked from shrubs along the Greater Jungle's border, hasira leaf was a sedative herb potent enough to knock out a mature bull elephant when consumed; it wasn't wise to inhale its fragrance at close range, even in small quantities.

"We should get moving." Mama's gaze had locked on an illuminated tent set across the Night Zoo's grounds; other beastkeepers were already heading toward it with animals in tow. From here, it was no larger than a candle's red-gold flame, but Koffi recognized it—the Hema was where tonight's show would be held. Mama glanced her way again. "Ready?"

Koffi grimaced. She was never ready for shows at the Night Zoo, but that hardly mattered. She'd just moved to stand on the other side of Diko when she noticed something.

"What's wrong?" Mama asked, noting Koffi's raised eyebrow.

"You tell *me*." Now Koffi squinted. Something was off about her mother's expression, but she couldn't quite tell what. She studied it harder. The two of them looked a lot alike—shoulder-length black twists, broad nose and full mouth framed by a heart-shaped face—but there was something *else* about Mama tonight. "You look . . . different."

"Oh." Mama looked uncharacteristically flustered, there was no doubt about it now. Then Koffi named it, that foreign emotion in her mother's eyes. She was embarrassed to realize the thing she hadn't recognized was happiness.

"Did . . . something happen?"

Mama shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Well, I was going to wait until tomorrow to tell you. After what happened with Sahel earlier it didn't seem right to discuss it, but . . ."

"But?"

"Baaz pulled me aside a few hours ago," she said. "He calculated our debt balance, and . . . we're almost paid off."

"What?" Something like shock and joy erupted in Koffi. Diko snorted at the sudden outburst, sending tendrils of smoke into the air, but she ignored him. "How?"

"Those extra hours we took on added up." Mama offered a small smile. She was standing straighter, like a plant coming into full bloom. "We only have two more payments left, and we could probably pay those off in the next few days."

Sheer disbelief coursed through Koffi. "And after that, we're done?"

"Done." Mama nodded. "The debt will be paid, interest and all."

Koffi felt a long-held tension within her release as she exhaled. Like most things in the Night Zoo, the terms and conditions be-
held by its indentured workers benefitted few. Eleven years of service with Mama had taught her that. But they'd won, beaten Baaz at his own wretched game. They were going to *leave*. It was so rare that beastkeepers managed to pay back their debts—the last one who'd managed it had done so at least a year ago—but now it was their turn.

"Where will we go?" Koffi asked. She could barely believe she was really posing the question. They'd never gone anywhere; she barely remembered a life outside the Night Zoo.

Mama closed the gap between them and took Koffi's hand in hers. "We can go *wherever we want*." She spoke with a fervor Koffi had never heard before. "You and I, we'll leave this place and start over somewhere else, and we'll never, *ever* look back. We'll never return."

Never return. Koffi considered the words. All her life she'd longed for them, dreamed of them. Hearing them now, however, they felt strangely different.

"What?" Mama noted her changed expression immediately. "What is it?"

"It's just . . ." Koffi didn't know if they were the right words, but she tried. "We'll never see anyone here ever again."

Mama's expression softened with understanding. "You'll miss it."

Koffi nodded, hating herself for doing so. She didn't necessarily love working at the Night Zoo, but it was the only home she'd ever known, the only *life* she'd ever known. She thought of the other beastkeepers, not quite a family, but certainly people she cared about.

"I'll miss them too," said Mama quietly, reading her thoughts. "But they wouldn't want us to stay here, Koffi, not if we didn't have to."

"I just wish we could help them," Koffi murmured. "I wish we could help all of them."

Mama offered a small smile. "You're a compassionate girl. You lead with your heart, like your father."

Koffi shifted uncomfortably. She didn't like being compared to Baba. Baba was gone.

"Sometimes, though, you can't lead with your heart," said Mama gently. "You have to think with your *head*."

A horn's brassy trumpeting split the air without warning, its summons rising from the distant Temple of Lkossa to reverberate across the Night Zoo's lawns in long, sonorous notes. They both stiffened as the sounds of newly agitated beasts filled the ground

around them, and Diko bared his teeth in anticipation. The city's saa-horn had at last announced nightfall. It was time. Again, Mama's eyes flitted from the Hema to Koffi.

"It's almost over," she said softly, a touch of hope in her voice. "I know how hard this has been, but it's almost over, I promise. We're going to be okay."

Koffi didn't answer as Mama tugged Diko's leash to lead him toward the massive tent. She followed, but kept a step behind. Her eyes cast wide, holding in their gaze the final remnants of a sky the color of blood. Mama's words echoed in her mind.

We're going to be okay.

They would be okay, she knew that now, but her thoughts still lingered on something else, *someone* else. Sahel. He *wasn't* okay—he'd never be okay again. She couldn't help but think of him then, of the boy with the crooked smile. She couldn't help but think of the monster that had killed him and wonder who it would take next.

CHAPTER 2

FROM THE ROOT

In the years before his disappearance, they called Satao Nkrumah mad.

Later, his colleagues would suggest that the telltale signs of decline had lurked just beneath the surface, quietly ravaging the scholar's mind like moss on a rotting tree. The symptoms had become increasingly apparent over time: fits, erratic mood swings, worsening amnesia. But when old Master Nkrumah, age eighty-seven, had begun referring to the Greater Jungle as “her,” *that* had been the last straw. Caretakers had been procured, intervention plans arranged. An assembly of well-intentioned people had marched right up to the elderly man's front door one rainy afternoon to escort him—by reason, or by force—to a facility for proper care. They'd discovered an unsettling surprise.

Satao Nkrumah had vanished.

He'd left his modest home with nothing but the clothes on his back. He hadn't even taken his journal, which would later become prized for its unrivaled accounts of the Zamani Region's natural

history. Search parties had yielded nothing, and after several days, rescue efforts had been suspended.

Decades later, Lkossan academics still occasionally spoke of old Nkrumah, musing over his infamous demise and disappearance. Some believed silver-haired yumboes from the depths of the Greater Jungle had spirited the old man away, and still danced with him barefoot by moonlight. Others held a more sinister opinion, sure that some malevolent creature had dragged him from his bed. Of course, these stories were just that, a collection of myths and folktales. Ekon Okojo, who was *not* an academic, knew better than to believe in myths and folktales—they lacked accreditation—but there *was* one thing he believed in with certainty.

The Greater Jungle was an evil place, and it could not be trusted.

Sweat rolled down the back of his neck in beads as he marched, focusing on the steady crunch beneath his sandals instead of the eerie black-trunked trees to his immediate right. *Five hundred seventy-three steps exactly, a good number.* He tapped his fingers against his side in a steady rhythm as he added to that count.

One-two-three. One-two-three. One-two-three.

Goose bumps stippled his bare arms despite the heat, but he did his best to ignore them too, and continued his counting.

One-two-three. One-two-three. One-two-three.

He'd prayed to the Six that he wouldn't be assigned a patrol shift tonight, but it seemed the gods either hadn't heard him or hadn't cared. It was nearly dusk now, the time when Lkossa's blood-orange sun fell behind the trees and set their silhouettes ablaze, the time he *least* liked to be near the jungle. He swallowed hard, tightening his grip on the leather-hilted hanjari tucked into his belt.

“We found the last body earlier.”

Kamau was walking beside him, shoulder to shoulder, his hawkish gaze trained ahead. He seemed unbothered by the adjacent jungle, but he did look fatigued. “It was an old woman, prone to late night wandering.”

Ekon drew in a sharp breath. “How bad?”

“Bad.” Kamau shook his head. “We had to wrap what was left of the remains in a blanket just to get her to the temple for cremation. It . . . wasn’t pretty.”

The remains. Ekon tore his gaze from the trees, fighting a sudden wave of nausea. For his part, Kamau’s expression remained stoic. Most people said that Ekon and Kamau, seventeen and nineteen respectively, looked more like twins than like older and younger brother—both had skin the color of rain-soaked earth, umber-brown eyes, and coiled black hair tapered on the sides in Yaba fashion. But their looks were where their similarities ended; Kamau was more muscled, while Ekon was of a leaner build. Kamau favored a spear; Ekon preferred books in his spare time. And there was another visible difference between them tonight.

Ekon’s kaftan was clean. His brother’s was bloody.

“Didn’t see you at dinner last night,” Ekon noted, trying for a distraction.

Kamau didn’t answer. He was staring at a shrub of silver-veined leaves clustered near the roots of a nearby tree. When his gaze lingered, Ekon cleared his throat.

“Kam?”

“What?”

“I . . . asked where you were last night.”

Kamau frowned. “Father Olufemi had some work for me to do, confidential.” He glanced at Ekon’s fingers, still drumming at his side. “You’re doing that weird thing again.”

“Sorry.” Ekon closed his hand in a fist, forcing his fingers to still. He couldn’t really remember when he’d started doing it, the counting, just that it was something he couldn’t help. It was impossible to explain, but there was something calming in the habit, a comfort he found in the trifecta of it.

One-two-three.

Three. *Three* was a good number, as was any number divisible by it.

He let the new count in his head fill the awkward silence that followed. It was easier to think about numbers than to think about the fact that Kamau hadn’t actually answered his question. There’d been a time when he and his brother had shared everything with each other, but that was happening less and less lately. When it became clear his brother wasn’t going to offer anything else, he tried again. “So . . . there are still no new leads? No witnesses?”

“Are there ever?” Kamau kicked at a pebble in frustration. “It’s the same as always. No tracks, just bodies.”

Bodies. A shiver ran through Ekon, and a solemn quiet settled between them like dust as they continued on. It had been nearly a full day since the Shetani’s latest victims had been recovered along the jungle’s edge. By now, it should have been less shocking—the beast had menaced Lkossa longer than Ekon had been alive—but in truth, it was impossible to get used to the carnage left in its wake. Somehow, the pools of blood in the dirt always managed to be horrific, the mutilated corpses ever-sickening. Ekon’s stomach churned at the thought of the mortality report he’d read a few

hours ago. Eight victims. The youngest one this time had been a little boy, an indentured servant no older than twelve, found alone. Those were the kinds of people the beast seemed to always pick—the defenseless, the vulnerable.

They rounded a bend in the path where the sunlight had not yet withdrawn. At once, Ekon tensed. To his right, the jungle's trees still loomed like sentries; to his left, a barren expanse of russet dirt stretched several yards wide between the city's edge and the jungle's border to create a no-man's-land. It was a familiar place. As small children, he and Kamau had come here to play when they were feeling brave or reckless. They'd fashioned sticks into fake spears and pretended the two of them alone could defend their city from the creatures of the Greater Jungle described in the old fables. But those adventures were a thing of the past; times had changed. Now when Ekon looked into the jungle's snarl of trees, roots, and vines, he remembered no fables.

He just remembered a voice.

Ekon.

Ekon started. Every time he heard his father's voice in his head, it was slurred like that of a man who'd drunk too much palm wine.

Please. Ekon, please.

It wasn't real, Ekon knew that, but his heartbeat still quickened. He started to drum his fingers again, faster, trying to use the counts to center himself and quell what he knew was coming next.

One-two-three. One-two-three. Don't think about it. One-two-three. One-two-three.

It didn't work. The corners of his vision began to blur, growing hazy as an old nightmare returned to him. He felt himself slipping, struggling to separate reality from memory, the immediate present

from the distant past. In his imagination, he wasn't at the jungle's edge anymore, he was *in* the jungle now, hearing everything, *seeing* everything, things he didn't want to . . .

Ekon, please.

And then he saw the body, soaked in dark blood. He heard a menacing rustle in the leaves just before a putrid smell soured the air—the smell of something long dead. He saw a shadowy figure weaving between trees, a monster.

It all led back to the monster.

In protest, his lungs seized, and then Ekon forgot how to breathe at all. The trees seemed to be reaching for him now, gnarled black branches outstretched like claws, eager . . .

“Ekon?”

As suddenly as it had descended, the opaque haze in Ekon's mind receded, returning him to the present. He was back at the jungle's edge, his father's voice was gone, and Kamau had stopped walking. Concern creased the skin between his brother's brows. “You okay?”

“Uh, yeah.” Ekon shook himself, brushing away the remnants of the nightmare like a cobweb. “Just . . . thinking about tonight.”

“Ah.” The brief bemusement vanished from Kamau's face, replaced with a look of knowing. “You're scared.”

“No.”

“It's entirely understandable,” said Kamau smugly. He made a show of stretching, and Ekon resented how much bigger his biceps were. “Some consider the temple's rites of passage to be the most difficult in all Eshōza. Of course, *I* didn't find them too challenging . . .”

Ekon rolled his eyes. Two years ago, his brother had become

eligible to join the Sons of the Six, the city's elite warriorship. His rites had gone so well that, immediately after his initiation, he'd been promoted to a kapteni, a captain, despite his youth. Now Kamau was a well-respected warrior, a man. In their people's eyes, Ekon was still just an unproven boy.

"Hey." As though he could hear Ekon's thoughts, Kamau's expression turned rueful. "Don't worry, you're going to pass."

"Don't you have to say that?"

Now Kamau rolled his eyes. "No. And I certainly wouldn't bother to if I didn't mean it." He punched Ekon in the arm. "Just loosen up a little, okay? Relax. You've stayed out of trouble, you know your scriptures better than anyone, and . . . your spearwork's almost as good as mine. *Almost*. Plus, you're an Okojo, so you were basically born for this."

Ekon felt as though he'd swallowed a kola nut whole. *Born for this*. For generations, every male Okojo had served the Sons of the Six, a longer tradition than that of almost any other family in Lkossa. That legacy was fortified, respected; it left little room for ineptitude.

"You'll make our family proud." Kamau studied his sandals. "And I know Baba would be proud too, if he were still here."

At the mention of their father, Ekon flinched. "Thanks." He paused before speaking again. "Look, Kam, I know I'm not allowed to know what's going to happen beforehand, but can't you—?"

"*Nope*." Kamau was already shaking his head, a renewed grin tugging at the corners of his mouth even as he tried to look serious. "The rites change each year at the presiding Kuhani's discretion, Ekkie. It'll be Father Olufemi who chooses yours. Even *I* don't know what it will be."

The imaginary worms wriggling around in Ekon's stomach settled momentarily. He was still nervous, but knowing that he wouldn't have to do whatever Kamau had done during *his* rites of passage was a small comfort.

They reached the end of the patrol path and stopped. Just yards away, the edge of the Greater Jungle unfurled before them. Kamau looked up, and Ekon followed his brother's gaze to take in the silver-white stars beginning to speckle the sky overhead. In their quiet luminance, the scars left from the Rupture almost disappeared.

"We'd better get going," said Kamau. "It's nearly time."

Ekon didn't admit it aloud, but the more distance they put between themselves and the jungle's border, the better he felt. With each step away from it, the tension in his shoulders eased. Gradually, the evening air filled with the familiar din that was the city of Lkossa, the sounds and smells of home.

Along its dirt-swept streets, grocers stood posted beside stalls of fresh fruit, haggling down their final sales as shops prepared to close. Ekon tallied each one. He counted fifteen different merchants waving wax-dyed textiles through the air, and counted a group of seven boys each balanced on one leg as they stopped their game of ampe to wave enthusiastically at Kamau when they saw his hanjari's gilded hilt. A huddle of young women—*four* young women—giggled behind their hands when they passed eyeing Kamau appreciatively, and Ekon tried to temper an old stab of jealousy. As a boy, he'd been used to people giving Baba this kind of attention when they saw him in uniform, but with Kamau it was harder. Ekon wanted that respect and admiration for himself, to be noticed without trying.

Almost there, he reminded himself as his fingers drummed at his side. After you pass your last rite of passage tonight, you'll become a Son of the Six, a warrior, and a man. It'll be your turn. Even in the privacy of his mind, that promise felt like it belonged to someone else.

The streets quieted as they neared the road that led to the temple, but just before it, Kamau's expression hardened.

"Halt!"

At once, the street's bustle died, and apprehensive gazes lifted. Even Ekon stopped in confusion. There were, by his count, only eighteen people here. He searched a moment, then found what Kamau already had. He'd miscounted.

The little girl standing a few yards from them had dark, sunken eyes, a tangle of uncombed black hair framing her gaunt face. She wore a threadbare tunic, one sleeve hanging off her too-sharp shoulder, and the skin of her legs and feet was visibly dry and cracked. For a moment, Ekon didn't understand her frightened expression as she stared back at them, but then he saw her bulging pocket, the tremor in her hands. She had the distinct look of someone who'd just been caught.

"You!" Kamau started toward her, and Ekon's heart sank. "Remain where you are!"

A single beat passed before the girl tore down the street.

"Stop!" Kamau broke into a run, and Ekon did too. No one else in the street moved as they wove between people in pursuit. The girl veered right, then disappeared into a forked alley. Kamau growled in frustration. "These passages connect." He started down one and pointed Ekon in the opposite direction. "Take the other!"

Ekon obeyed without hesitation, ignoring the small pang of

pity in his chest. The girl had looked so young, scared. He didn't know if she'd actually stolen anything of value, but that didn't matter. She'd disobeyed a direct order from a Son of the Six. If she was caught, she'd be caned. He shook his head, pushing emotion away to refocus. Inadvertently, the girl had led them into the Chafu District, Lkossa's slums, a rougher part of the city. His hand flew to his hanjari as he ran. He wouldn't make a fool of himself here by getting jumped or ambushed.

He turned a corner, expecting to find Kamau. Instead, he stared down an empty alley.

"Hello?" His call went unanswered, echoing eerily against the grimy mud bricks. "Kam?"

"Afraid not, young man."

Ekon whirled. An old woman was sitting cross-legged against one of the alley's walls, nearly camouflaged in its filth. Her hair was white and cottony, and her skin was brown and uneven in texture like roughly hewn wood. A tarnished amulet hung from a cord around her neck, though it was too dark to distinguish its details. She offered Ekon a gummy smile as they appraised each other, and he fought a shudder—she was missing several teeth.

"How strange . . ." The old woman dragged a finger across her bottom lip. She was speaking Zamani, but her dialect had an almost musical lilt. She was a Gede, and of the Gedezi People. "I don't usually see Yaba boys in this area."

Ekon drew himself up to full height. "I'm looking for a little girl, have you seen—?"

Ekon.

Ekon went stock-still, unnerved. For a second, he thought he'd heard . . . but . . . no, not here. It couldn't be. He was too far away

from the jungle now for Baba's voice to follow him. It wasn't possible. He cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Have you—?"

Ekon, please.

This time, Ekon's jaw snapped shut. He didn't resist the shiver that ran the length of him.

No. He looked right, in the direction of the jungle, as his fingers danced at his side. *No, not here, not now . . .*

"Does it call to you often?"

Ekon started. He'd almost forgotten about the old woman entirely. She was still sitting before him, but now her expression held amusement.

"I—" Ekon paused, trying to process her words. "*It?*"

"The jungle." The old woman readjusted, rocking from side to side as though swaying to an inaudible tune. "It calls to me too sometimes. Funny how magical things work."

A chill skittered up Ekon's bare arm like a spider; his mouth went paper dry. "There . . . there's no such thing as magic," he said shakily.

"Is *that* what you think?" The old woman cocked her head like a bird and rubbed a thumb against her amulet. She was studying Ekon much harder now. "How curious, *very* curious . . ."

Every instinct in Ekon's body told him to run, but suddenly that felt impossible. Something about the old woman's voice, her *eyes*, held him fast. He stepped toward her, tugged like a fish helplessly hooked on a line—

"Ekkie?"

Ekon looked up, the strange trance instantly broken. Kamau was approaching from the other end of the alley, lit sconces mounted

on the wall throwing his frown into sharp relief. "What are you doing?"

"I—" Ekon looked to where the old woman had been sitting. She wasn't there now. Strangely, he found he had trouble even recalling her likeness. It was as though she hadn't existed at all. Unnerved, he faced Kamau, trying to keep his voice steady. "I . . . couldn't find the girl."

"Me neither," said Kamau. "But we don't have time to keep looking. Come on."

They walked in silence until they reached the two gilded pillars marking the start of the Takatifu District, and Ekon stood straighter. The city of Lkossa was a collection of neatly ordered sections, but the temple's district was different. It was the only part of the city that maintained a curfew; after sunset, it was closed to the public. They made their way up its winding path, and even from there he could already discern the temple itself. Of course, it was home, the place where he lived, but tonight it seemed different. Its massive dome, capped over white alabaster stonework, seemed determined to hold every one of the stars' glittering lights in its reflection. The breeze lifted, and he smelled the cloves of prayer incense emanating from its arched windows and parapets. Just as he'd expected, when they got closer, he made out two figures standing at the top of the main stairs with their backs turned away. Fahim and Shomari—his co-candidates—were waiting for him. It was time.

"When we meet again, you'll be an anointed Son of the Six." Kamau stopped beside him at the base of the stairs, keeping his voice low. "We'll be brothers in spear, just as we are brothers in

blood.” He made the proclamation without a trace of doubt. Ekon swallowed. His brother had faith in him, he believed in him.

Just like Baba once believed in you, said a cruel voice in his mind. *He trusts you, just like Baba did.*

Ekon shoved that voice away as he nodded.

“Be strong.” Kamau nudged him forward before receding into the night. “You can do this. And remember: Kutoka mzizi.”

Ekon started up the stairs, the words echoing in his wake. *Kutoka mzizi* meant “from the root.” The old family adage was a reminder of where he came from and the expectations that came with that. *Kutoka mzizi*.

Baba had been the one to teach him and Kamau those hallowed words when they were small. He should have been here to say them now.

But Baba wasn’t here. Baba was dead.

Just before he reached the landing, Ekon glanced over his shoulder. Kamau was already gone, and from here the Greater Jungle on the opposite side of the city was little more than an ill-shapen smudge against the obsidian night, too far away for its voices to reach him. Still, as he turned back around, Ekon couldn’t ignore the feeling that—from within its depths—something was watching him, and waiting.

CHAPTER 3

THE SMALLEST RESISTANCE

No matter how many times she'd faced it over the years, Koffi had always dreaded the Hema.

She gnawed on her bottom lip, unease rising as she watched its crimson folds flutter in the breeze, noting the violating way its central pole impaled the maiden night sky like a gilded spear. Her steps dragged as she and Mama moved to join the queue of beastkeepers waiting to enter it with their assigned beasts.

Almost over, she thought. This is almost over.

Once, in another era, she supposed the massive tent might have been considered grand, even impressive to some. But time had taken a visible toll; tears in the seams hadn't been mended, and rust coated most of the metal stakes hammered into the grass to keep it secure. Attendance at the Night Zoo had, like many things in Lkossa over the years, steadily declined, and it showed.

"Smile," Mama reminded her, guiding them to their place in line as several of the other beastkeepers took cautionary steps back. Koffi twisted her mouth to form a half grimace she hoped

would suffice. Baaz required all beastkeepers of the Night Zoo to look cheerful during shows, and famously punished those who didn't. With a shiver, she thought of the whipping post, not so far from here. The cruelty of it—the bizarreness of being forced to look happy about handling creatures who could kill you as soon as look at you—was one thing she *wouldn't* miss about working here.

"Don't forget to check Diko's harness," said Mama. "Make sure it's secure before we—"

"Hey, Kof!"

Koffi looked up, a genuine smile tugging at her lips now. A boy of about fourteen was approaching them fast, surrounded by a pack of wild dogs. He had bright, intelligent brown eyes and a permanently cheeky grin.

"Hey, Jabir."

Upon seeing the wild dogs, Diko hissed, his multicolored scales rippling as he eyed them. Mama pulled him away with a disapproving look. "Jabir," she said sternly, "those dogs are supposed to be on leashes."

"Meh, they don't need them." Jabir's smile didn't falter. "They're well trained."

"Didn't one of them poop in Baaz's slippers the other day?"

Jabir's mouth twitched. "Like I said, they're well trained."

A real laugh bubbled in Koffi's throat, followed by a shot of unexpected pain. Jabir was her closest friend at the Night Zoo, like a brother to her in some ways. She watched him drop to his knees to play with his dogs. Leaving the Night Zoo would mean leaving him too; she didn't relish having to tell him the news, but she had to. It would be better if he heard it from her.

“Jabir,” she started tentatively. “I need to tell you some—”

“Did you hear about tonight’s visitors?” Jabir smirked the way he usually did when he was about to gossip. One of his jobs at the zoo was to run errands for Baaz, so he always had news first.

“No?” said Koffi, momentarily distracted. “What about them?”

“It’s some merchant couple visiting from the Baridi Region,” he said. “Apparently, they’re pretty rich. Baaz is angling for a patronage. I saw them coming in. The old man seems okay, but the wife walks like she’s got a stick up her—”

“Jabir!”

Koffi snorted as Jabir offered Mama a sheepish smile. His words lingered in her mind, and she looked around as more beastkeepers gathered. She hadn’t noticed before, but far more animals were out of their cages tonight, and the grounds did look like they’d gotten an extra bit of grooming. If this merchant couple *did* agree to a patronage, it would add not only esteem but new revenue for the zoo. Baaz would be especially anxious tonight.

A dulcet chorus of voices suddenly rose from the inside of the tent, beautiful and harmonic. At once, all three of them stilled. Those were the Night Zoo’s indentured musicians; their song meant the show had officially commenced. It took only seconds for a thunderous percussion of goatskin drums to join the singing, and instinctively Koffi’s own heart attuned to their pounding cadence. She looked up when the musical overture ended, and in its place an anticipatory silence weighted the air.

“Excellent!” said someone inside the tent. “A lovely performance from our choir!” Koffi recognized that booming showman’s voice—*that* was Baaz. “If you enjoyed that, Bwana Mutunga,

you're sure to marvel at the beauties I have in store for you tonight. Though, of course, they'll all pale in comparison to your lovely wife. Bi Mutunga, words could never do your radiance justice . . ."

Koffi barely managed not to roll her eyes. Baaz was using *Bwana* and *Bi*, the more formal honorifics of the Zamani language, clearly trying to impress. The Hema's canvas was too thick for Koffi to discern anything from outside, but she heard what sounded like two sets of hands offering polite applause as the musicians exited the tent. *Two, only two guests*. Baaz would have told them that this was part of their "exclusive" experience, but she knew better; no one else had showed up. Canceled shows due to lack of attendance seemed to happen more and more often lately. After a moment, her master spoke again.

"Now, as I'm sure you've both heard, my spectacular Night Zoo boasts the widest array of specialty creatures in the region, the likes of which you've never—"

"Just show us the animals," said a heavily accented female voice. "We do not plan to be here all evening."

There was an awkward pause. Then:

"Of course! Right away, Bi Mutunga! May I now present, without further ado, the Parade of Beasts!"

It was a cue, and no sooner had Baaz spoken the words than he was pushing open the Hema's front entrance flap. Koffi tensed on principle at the sight of him.

To his credit, Baaz Mtombé certainly *looked* like the owner of a "spectacular" Night Zoo; everything about him seemed larger than life, like a caricature. He was a mountain of a man with deep marula-brown skin and a mane of thick black and blond

dreadlocks that stuck out in every direction. With his red dashiki and fake-silk slippers, he looked jolly, if not slightly overdressed. Koffi knew better than to believe the ruse.

“Move!” He beckoned the first beastkeepers in line as they struggled to guide a pair of silverback gorillas into the tent by their harnesses. “Just as we’ve rehearsed, *big smiles!*”

The line ahead of them began moving into the tent, and Koffi swallowed. There was nothing to be afraid of, really; shows were the same every time and this one would likely be one of her last. Still, she was oddly nervous. All too soon, she, Mama, and Diko reached the Hema’s entry. She tried not to inhale Baaz’s spicy cologne as they ducked past him, and then they were inside.

If the outside of the Hema reflected what the old tent had once been, the interior clung to its former grandeur with a desperate grip. Its decor was slightly dated, furnished with old animal-print throws and well-worn chaises. Carefully arranged candlelight gave the place a flickering golden glow while also hiding some of the more stubborn stains in the rugs, and the heady scent of palm wine just barely masked the stench of animals past and present. A massive statue of a peacock carved from turquoise was arranged in one corner, and in the center, an open space was designated as a stage. A well-dressed couple sat before it, waiting on a plush red divan.

The man looked old enough to be Koffi’s grandfather. His skin was dark and wrinkled, his cropped hair nearly white. He wore a plum-colored dashiki Koffi knew at once was expensive despite its subtlety, and he exuded the air of someone senior and refined. Beside him, his wife was the opposite, uncomfortably young and gaudy. She seemed partial to the color green, because she was

covered in it from her wax-print dress to the glittering jade beads clacking at the ends of her box braids. She pinched her nose as Koffi and Mama entered the tent with Diko, and an embarrassed heat crept up Koffi's neck. Jabir followed behind with his wild dogs, and Baaz followed last.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He said the practiced words as though he were addressing millions instead of an audience of two. "For your delectation and delight, I present to you the many creatures of my spectacular Night Zoo! Tonight, we will take you on a journey through the wilds of the southern marshlands, the ferocities of the Greater Jungle, even specimens procured from the farthest reaches of the western wastes. First, the *guiamala*!"

Koffi relaxed a little as she and Mama moved to a space against the tent's walls while two beastkeepers ushered the camel-like *guiamala* to its center. They walked it in circles several times, letting the merchant and his wife admire the shiny black spikes running down the length of its back, each one sharp enough to draw blood.

"From the Kusonga Plains," Baaz narrated, "the *guiamala* is a herbivore and can survive weeks without water. They're graceful creatures, and the story goes that a western princess once used the spike of one for a *love potion* . . ."

Koffi let Baaz's stories about the Night Zoo's creatures—some true, most fake—blend together as more animals were summoned one by one. He told a particularly gruesome story about the silver-back gorillas when they were called up next, then shared a folktale about impundulus when a young male beastkeeper came forward with one perched on his arm. She held her breath as the shrieking hyena was brought forth—when unmuzzled, its cackle could para-

lyze the human body—but fortunately, Baaz did *not* suggest a live demonstration. Soon enough, he was looking to Jabir.

“And now for a special, local treat,” he said proudly. “May I present Jabir and his Lkossan wild dogs!”

A surge of pride ran through Koffi as Jabir stepped forward with his fluffy brown dogs and offered both a smile and a cordial bow to the Mutungas. While she didn’t care much for the Night Zoo’s shows, Jabir took them in stride, a natural performer. He raised a hand, fingers dancing through the air in a complicated array of signals, and at once the dogs stilled. Koffi smiled. Jabir’s expertise was in nonverbal commands; he could train almost anything with them. He pointed two fingers, and the dogs began to run around him in a perfect circle; a closed fist then directed them to rise to their hind legs and yip. Bwana Mutunga chortled as one of the dogs faced him and bent its forelegs in an unmistakable bow, while another hopped adorably in place. Koffi felt another pang. *These* were the moments she’d miss.

Jabir demonstrated a few more tricks before clapping his hands and signaling for the dogs to stop and sit. He offered a deep bow while the merchant applauded.

“Well, well!” said Bwana Mutunga. “That was quite impressive, young man!”

Jabir grinned before herding his dogs offstage and letting Baaz resume his position.

“One of the zoo’s up-and-coming stars!” Baaz said, beaming. “And there’s more yet to see! For our next act—”

“My love.”

Koffi glanced up to see the merchant’s wife, Bi Mutunga, fanning the air with a distinctly impatient expression. She addressed

her husband. "It's getting late. Perhaps we should return to the caravan."

"But . . ." Baaz's voice faltered. "But surely you'll stay just a little longer? I haven't even given you the full tour of the grounds yet, an exclusive offer for patrons only—"

"Ah, I'm afraid my younger, better half is right, Baaz." Bwana Mutunga gave his wife a doting look. Like her, his accented words had the thick, choppy cut of a Baridian, a northerner. "I have business at the temple tomorrow morning. Perhaps we could discuss a patronage next time . . ."

Baaz wrung his hands, anxious. "But you haven't even seen our grand finale yet!" He addressed the merchant's wife. "I think you'll be particularly interested in this one, Bi Mutunga. If I could just have ten more minutes of your time—"

"Five." Bi Mutunga's expression didn't change.

"Perfect!" Baaz clapped his hands, at once revitalized. Koffi knew what was coming next, but still jolted when her master's eyes shot to her. "May I now present Diko the jokomoto!"

Just keep calm. Koffi willed the words as she and Mama led Diko forward together. She held his leash, but Mama stayed at her side, there for backup. *You've done this a hundred times,* she reasoned. *Easy, just like you've always done . . .*

Slowly, they guided Diko around the perimeter of the stage. In the candlelight, his scales shimmered in an almost mesmerizing way. Though she didn't dare look up, she heard the merchant's soft sighs of awe.

"What an *exquisite* creature," said Bwana Mutunga. "Baaz, where did you say this one was from?"

"Ah." There was excitement in Baaz's voice. "Jokomotos come

from the Katili Desert of the west, they're exceedingly rare beasts these days—"

"Speaking of *beasts*," Bwana Mutunga interrupted. Koffi chanced a look at him as she and Mama made another lap. "Is it true that the Shetani got one of your keepers, Baaz? I heard it went on another rampage last night, killed eight people."

Koffi faltered in her steps as a hush fell over the tent. She knew without looking that every beastkeeper in the vicinity would have stilled at the mention of Sahel, waiting to hear Baaz's answer to the question.

"It's . . . true." Baaz kept his tone light. "But the boy did *choose* to run away. He was a fool to leave my generous protection."

Koffi's free hand curled in a fist, but she kept walking. For the merchant's part, when Koffi looked at him, he was chuckling into his tea.

"That would be quite an addition to your show, would it not?"

Koffi saw unmistakable longing flash across her master's features. "Well, a man can dream," he said wistfully. "But I think I'd have to barter my soul for such an acquisition."

"I must admit . . ." The merchant balanced the porcelain cup on his knee. "That abomination has been something of a boon for my business."

Baaz's eyes brightened. "Remind me again what you said you traded in, Bwana. Priceless jewels? Fine textiles?"

Bwana Mutunga gave Baaz an indulgent look. "I *didn't* say, but it's neither," he corrected. "My specialty is in administrative supplies—quills, papyrus, Baridian ink—the Temple of Lkossa alone constitutes a quarter of my business, what with all the books and maps they house there."

“Naturally.” Baaz nodded as though he knew all about such things.

“I used to have to price match against my competitors,” Bwana Mutunga went on. “But now most of them fear traveling to Lkossa, so I have the monopoly! It’s been a blessing!”

Baaz’s expression held visible greed. “Well, Bwana, let me be the first to wholeheartedly congratulate you on your . . . *prosperity*.”

Koffi fought to hold her stage smile in place, but it felt more and more like a scowl. The Shetani was no blessing to the people of Lkossa; it was a menace. Anyone who saw such a monster as good was no better than dirt, in her opinion. She thought of Sahel, how small he’d looked in his shroud. He’d run from the Night Zoo and into the Greater Jungle because he’d felt like he had no choice. Some people wouldn’t understand that—Baaz had called him a fool—but she knew better. She knew that poverty could be a different kind of monster, always lurking and waiting to consume. For some, death *was* the kinder beast. Not that men like these two understood that.

“I wonder, Baaz . . .” Bwana Mutunga was now leaning forward in his chair. “Could we . . . have a closer look at the jokomoto?”

Baaz perked up. “Of course!” He turned to Koffi and her mother. “Girls, bring Diko over for our guests to see.”

At his words, Koffi froze. Usually, they just paraded Diko around the stage a few times, so *this* was a break from the routine. Instinctively, she met Mama’s eyes, but her mother didn’t look worried. She nodded, and together they guided Diko toward the merchant and his wife, stopping a foot in front of them.

“*Fascinating*.” Bwana Mutunga moved his teacup to a side table

as he actually stood to examine Diko. At the sudden movement, the jokomoto tensed but didn't move.

Easy, boy. Koffi kept her eyes trained on Diko, willing him to behave himself. *Easy does it . . .*

If Bwana Mutunga was impressed, his wife was decidedly not. She inhaled, then wrinkled her nose again. "It *stinks*," she declared. She pulled a small perfume bottle from a bag at her side and sprayed into the air aggressively. In the confines of the tent, the scent suffused the air, sharp and tangy. Diko hissed low, and Koffi's throat went dry as she suddenly noticed something near his neck.

One of the loops to his harness had come undone.

"I—" Koffi reached for the loop, then stopped herself. Mama had told her to make sure the harness was secure, *twice*. If Baaz saw that it wasn't now . . .

"Ugh!" Bi Mutunga fanned faster, waving her perfume around. "Honestly, the smell is absolutely—"

It happened fast, but for Koffi it seemed to take a century. She watched one of Diko's yellow eyes flick in her direction before he suddenly lunged, jaws snapping at Bi Mutunga's feet. His teeth caught the hem of her dress. She screamed, reeling back so violently, she flipped right over the back of the divan. Mama gasped, and Koffi's heart sank. Quickly she pulled Diko away. He'd calmed down again almost immediately, but it was too late.

"It . . . it *attacked* me!" Bi Mutunga jumped to her feet before her husband could get to her, tears and kohl streaking her face. She stared down at the embroidered hem of her dress, now in tatters, then looked to her husband. "My love, it tried to *kill* me! Look what it did to my clothes!"

No. Koffi's thoughts tangled together, unable to process what had just happened. This was very, *very* bad.

The merchant took his wife in his arms and held her a moment before jabbing an accusatory finger at Baaz. "You assured me your show was safe, Baaz!" he said angrily. "I was told this was a professional establishment!"

"B-B-Bwana." Baaz, usually cool under pressure, was stuttering. "I-I offer my humblest, most sincere apologies. The next time you come, I assure you, this won't—"

"The *next* time?" Bwana Mutunga's brows rose, incredulous. "My wife is traumatized, Baaz. We're never setting foot in this wretched place again. To think we even *considered* supporting it..."

"Wait!" Baaz's eyes went wide. "Wait, sir—"

He couldn't even finish his sentence before the merchant took his wife by the elbow and steered them out into the night. Koffi listened to their footsteps until they faded. For a long moment, no one in the Hema moved. She glanced up to see that the other beastkeepers' eyes were all fixed on either her, or Baaz. It was he who broke the silence.

"You didn't secure him."

Baaz's voice was dangerously low. No longer was he the jolly owner of a spectacular Night Zoo; now he was just Baaz, her master, glaring at her. *"Explain yourself."*

"I..." Koffi hated how small her voice sounded. She searched her mind for a decent answer but found none. The truth was, she *had* no good answer. She hadn't secured Diko's harness because she'd forgotten. Mama had reminded her, twice, but she hadn't done it. Her mind had been elsewhere, so distracted by the idea of leaving...

“You *will* pay for this.” Baaz’s words cut through her thoughts like a knife. “You’ll go to the whipping post, and a fine will be added to your debt—the sum of the two tickets I just lost. By my calculation, that’s about six months’ worth of your wages.”

Tears stung Koffi’s eyes. The whipping post was bad enough, but the fine . . . six *months’* wages. She and Mama would have to stay at the Night Zoo; they wouldn’t be leaving after all.

Baaz turned to one of the beastkeepers near him, then pointed at Koffi. “Take her out to the post now. She’ll learn her lesson—”

“No.”

Several beastkeepers started, Koffi included. For the first time, she looked to her mother, still standing on the other side of Diko. There was a strange resolve in her brown eyes.

“No,” Mama said again calmly. “*I’m* the one who forgot to secure Diko’s lead. The punishment and the fine should go to me.”

Koffi drew in a sharp breath and fought a sudden wave of pain. Mama was lying. She was going to take the blame for this, even though she hadn’t been the one in the wrong. She was sacrificing herself, her literal freedom. Koffi blinked back fresh tears.

“*Very well,*” Baaz sneered. “*You* can go to the post, then.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Take her away.”

Koffi still held Diko’s leash tightly, but her fingers felt numb as she watched one of the beastkeepers grab Mama by the upper arm and offer an apologetic look. Her mother held her head high, but Koffi saw it, the slight tremble in her bottom lip, the fear.

“No!” Koffi stepped forward, her voice trembling. “Mama, don’t—”

“*Be quiet, Koffi.*” Mama’s voice was even as their gazes met. “It’s all right.” She gave the beastkeeper another nod, more final, and he

started to escort her out of the tent. With every step, Koffi felt an acute internal pain.

No.

It wasn't right, wasn't *fair*. They'd been about to leave and be *free*. Now that glimmer of hope was gone, and it was *her* fault. Koffi ground her teeth and stared at her feet, determined not to cry. This Night Zoo had stolen many things from her in eleven years, these tears would not be one of them.

Her lungs strained as she took in a deep breath, and held on to it fiercely. Blood roared between her ears in protest, her heart pounded harder, but she refused to let the breath go. It was the smallest resistance, a losing battle from the start, but she relished the gesture. If she could control nothing else in her life, for a few seconds she would control this, the very breaths she took. A distinct sense of triumph filled her body as she finally exhaled, releasing the pressure in her chest.

And then beside her, something shattered.