MASQUERADE

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Each day, countless fleets of camel caravans sailed across the desert sea to reach Timbuktu.

Here, in this port city on the southern edge of the Sahara, waves of men, women, and children flooded the market, searching for supplies. Farmers and craftsmen proudly showcased their wares from behind wooden stands or in front of tents. Threads of dancers wove through cheerful crowds; juggling entertainers could be found on every corner. Travelers' stories of far-off lands rose and fell with the playful chords of musicians. Vibrant colors and savory scents swirled in the air as Timbuktu teemed with the trading, buying, and selling of everything from exotic spices to brilliant fabrics to precious salt and gold.

But today, Timbuktu was still.

I stood in front of a wooden platform, along with what felt like half the market goers. Rain poured from the skies, soaking through my brown wrapper. Thunder rumbled as a Songhai general was dragged onto the platform by soldiers who were not his own.

They forced the general to his knees, the wood beneath him groaning over the incessant patter of rain. His wet robes were stained with blood and grime. Water trickled from his turban, down his bruised face.

A third, smaller man drifted onto the platform. Lines were etched into his face, like ripples in a shadow. Each line marked a history—a birth, a marriage, a death. He frowned as his gaze swept over the crowd, chronicling yet another wrinkle, another event.

He extended his arms on either side of himself, and his billowing sleeves crowded around his elbows. "Ọba kìí pọ̀kọrin."

The customary introduction of griots pierced the air. The griot paused, allowing his baritone words to take their place among the crowd, before continuing in accented Arabic, "Gather, gather, hear me now. The Songhai rule this city no more. As of today, Timbuktu belongs to the Aláàfin of Yorùbáland."

The griot gestured to a group of soldiers standing nearby. From within their circle, an old man stepped forward. He wore a red and white kente toga that draped over one of his forearms and shoulders. Beneath the painted white dots covering his body, his skin was as brown and gnarled as an ancient baobab tree. It felt as though time itself paused to accommodate his slow approach.

The griot stepped back as the old man mounted the platform; griots represented nobles and the people, but divine correspondence with the òrìṣàs was left to babaláwos.

The babaláwo looked down at the general and raised a fist. Slowly, very slowly, he uncurled his fingers, uncovering a single cowpea in the center of his palm.

People around me recoiled. I leaned forward. I had heard of the sacred Yorùbá bean, but I had never seen one myself.

Although the general had not flinched, his full lips were clamped thin. From where I stood at the front of the crowd, I saw the fear that flashed across his eyes. He struggled in vain as soldiers pried open his jaw, and the babaláwo forced him to eat the cowpea.

"Great Ṣàngó," the babaláwo cried. His gossamer voice whirled around me, as though entwined in the wind. "This is the man who led your enemies. What is to be his fate?"

There was no answer, of course; the òrìṣàs never personally descended from the heavens to speak to the humans they presided over. Wind howled around us, growing crueler in its acceleration. Fruits were blown off nearby stands; orange sand surged forth. As I shielded my face from the storm, I wondered if all of Timbuktu would be uprooted before the trial ended.

Then lightning ruptured the sky, and the world shuddered under the thunder that followed.

"Ṣàngó has spoken," the griot boomed. He beckoned a soldier forward.

Rage rippled through the fear on the general's face. "This is what you call justice? You Yorùbá are nothing but a tribe of superstitious pagans—"

A soldier plunged a spear into the side of the general's neck. His declaration sputtered into wet gurgling as blood poured from the wound. He fell onto the platform, seizing, until his movements gradually came to a stop.

The babaláwo raised his arms to the sky. "Ṣàngó yọ mí."

"Ṣàngó yọ mí," the crowd echoed. *Ṣàngó saved me.*

The affirmation scratched my throat, threatening to bring more than words with it. But like the rest of the onlookers, I knew to thank the god of thunder and lightning for not condemning me to death instead. His wrath was as deadly as wildfire and just as easily spread.

The griot said, "Nothing about your life in Timbuktu need change. So long as your governor pays tribute to the Aláàfin, he may continue to rule as he sees fit." He turned to a richly-dressed man standing beside the platform in between two soldiers. "Do you accept these terms, or are you determined to follow the fate of Timbuktu's former general?"

The brown seemed to drain from the governor's face. He fell to his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. "I am honored to serve the Aláàfin," he said. Then, in stunted Yorùbá, he added, "An honor."

The griot nodded, and the crowd began to disperse, many of them taking cover from the rain. But I remained rooted in place. I watched as soldiers stepped forward to retrieve the body of the Songhai general. They hauled it onto a wagon like it was a sack of garri, moving with an efficiency that suggested they had done this for years, though they could not have been much older than I was, around the age of nineteen.

"There, there." A robust man slid next to me. He laid a meaty arm around my shoulder, his palm moist against my skin. "I understand your shock. Is it difficult to wrap around your head?"

"I've seen executions before," I said quietly. Though this was true, I had never seen lightning be the final verdict.

"I don't mean the execution." The kindness enveloping the man's words peeled back to reveal impatience beneath. I looked at him and saw that he was pointing at my head. "Your headscarf is the brown of an overripe plantain," he said. "It is old and stiff. Difficult to wear, yes?"

From somewhere within the sleeves of his tunic, he extracted a silk scarf so white that it stung my eyes. "My dear girl," he continued, "your scarf does justice to neither your black nor your beauty. What you need is a bright scarf, for the night sky needs its stars."

It was then I remembered that I did not know this man.

I shrugged his arm off, and as I made my way through the marketplace, other vendors called out to me, also telling me what I needed.

"Come and see your new sandals," called a man with a large beard and a larger belly. "The leather is soft and smooth, but they are strong."

"Fruit directly from the riverbanks of the Niger," proclaimed a woman as orange as the mangoes she held. "The juice can cure the most stubborn of illnesses."

The marketplace's rhythm resumed as though it had never paused. The Yorùbá seizure came as a surprise to no one; Timbuktu sat on agriculturally rich land in a commercially active area. When the Songhai captured the city three years ago, in 1468, they had only been one more addendum to Timbuktu's long history of changing hands. The city's population was not made up of just one people; there were the Songhai and the Yorùbá, but there were also the Fulani, the Moors, the Portuguese, and more. The only thing that unified Timbuktu's inhabitants was a

drive for profit. So long as the marketplace continued running, who ruled the city was of little importance.

I had come to the marketplace today with my mother, but in the commotion of the execution, I lost her. Knowing that she would not want me wandering around alone, I decided to head home.

As I rounded a corner onto another busy song-laced street, the Songhai general's execution replayed in my mind. It was an unconventional method of justice, feeding a cowpea to a man then killing him if lightning subsequently flashed or sparing him if it did not. Perhaps the Songhai general was right to call the Yorùbá superstitious, to imply that the will of their god was nothing more than nature's chance. And yet—with it being the very end of wet season, today's rainfall should not have been as heavy as it had been. I could not help but wonder if there was some truth to the common saying that the Yorùbá brought the storm wherever they went.

The rain had dwindled into a drizzle by the time I reached a quieter end of Timbuktu, on the outskirts of the market. The sandy road, less trodden upon here, branched out into evenly spaced compounds. Each were enclosed within waist-high mud-brick walls.

Eventually, I entered the compound of a sun-dried mud house with a flat roof. Its sandy yard was occupied by a handful of women, all of whom wore plain, brown wrappers and headscarves that blended into their skin. Under great plumes of smoke, the women moved between anvils, forges, and furnaces.

Metronomic pings rang through the air as two-handed hammers molded iron and steel into weapons or shaped gold and silver into elaborate designs. One woman sat on a low stool, pounding boiled yam in a wooden mortar for tonight's dinner. I knelt before them all, my knees sinking into warm mud.

"Good afternoon, aunties," I greeted.

"Welcome, child," my aunties chorused without looking up from their work, cuing me to stand.

These women were not really my aunties, but I had called them that for so long that their names had become foreign to my memory. Really, I was unsure if I had ever learned their names—and given that they had called me "child" my whole life, perhaps they never learned mine either.

I made my way to the house. I had just reached the archway when an auntie emerged from inside.

"Why are you going inside?" she asked me. "Is the work at your forge done?"

It was a clear reprimand, for we both knew that the work at our forges was never done. "My mother wants me to take inventory," I said. It was a task I had been given earlier that day.

Her brow unfurrowed; like all the other women here, she might have never fully warmed up to me, but she had nothing but respect for my mother.

She sighed. "You'll have to do inventory another time. I don't want you to wake her."

She gestured over her shoulder to inside the house. Within the dark single room, one of my older aunties lay on a sleeping mat. Although her eyes were closed, beads of sweat ran down her face, and her expression was pulled taut as though sleep was an arduous task. Alarmed, I noted that she was even skinnier than the last time I had seen her.

"She hasn't gotten better?" I asked.

My auntie shook her head sadly. "It is the governor's responsibility to provide for our guild, but even so, he's as stingy with medicine as with the food he gives us. I don't think he wants to waste any resources on an old blacksmith."

I frowned; the woman was not that old. Her sickness might have aged her, but I remembered the unlined, lively face she had worn when she had still been healthy. I had always believed her to be around the same age as my mother.

I shivered, a motion that had nothing to do with my soaked clothes. My mother and I had been blacksmiths my entire life. As unmarried women, it was one of the few ways we could make

a living—but sometimes I feared it was what would also kill us. My sick auntie was not the first of us to expire at her forge. Was this to be the fate of my mother and I as well, meeting death exhausted, neglected, and, worst of all, much too soon?

My distress must have shown on my face because my auntie placed a hand on my shoulder. "It'll be okay," she said gently. "She'll wake up soon, and when she does, we should give her something nice. Why don't you take a short break to make her one of your flowers?"

Holding silver and tweezers, I sat in my usual spot behind the house, my legs tucked to one side of me.

The silver had been shaped into a cylinder. One of the cylinder's ends was open, while the other was fused to a star-shaped sheet of metal. It was meant to be a nearly completed daffodil—or, at least, what I could remember of a daffodil's appearance. I had only seen a real one once, when a trader gifted me the flower.

That day, the trader had arrived in Timbuktu after weeks of traveling with his colorful caravan of slaves, bodyguards, scholars, poets, and fellow traders. Like so many others, the trader had heard of my mother's and aunties' abilities, and he had come to request an iron dagger. My aunties always focused on the orders from generals and kings, leaving less important clientele like him to me. My hands had been less steady than they were now, and my eyes less attuned to identify flaws, yet the trader had marveled at my average dagger.

"My dear," he said in awe, "what is your name?"

Since he already knew my state-given name, I told him my personal name. His eyes widened. "Wait here—I have just the thing for you."

I thought he was one of those people who tried to skip out on payment, and I thought he was doing a poor job of it—as we spoke, his traveling companions had been paying my mother.

He proved me wrong, however, by returning. “A flower for the child whose name means flower,” he proclaimed, handing me a flower that was a yellow unlike any gold I had ever seen. “This is a daffodil. They grow in distant lands far, far above the Sahara.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said. Then I grew sad, remembering the flowers I always saw in the market. They bloomed in the day, but after the sun had set and the customers had gone, merchants disposed of wilted petals. “But it’ll die.”

“Daffodils do not fear dying, for they have conquered Death himself.”

“Oh.” A pause. Then, “Perhaps you should keep this . . .”

I tried to return the flower to the possibly delirious man, but he only laughed. “Do not be afraid of daffodils, my dear,” he said, mistaking my wariness of him for fear of the flower. “They used neither strength nor sorcery to best Death. Just a simple song.” He grinned. “From the look on your face, I am guessing you are wondering what that song is?”

I had actually been wondering how a flower could possibly sing. However, the trader was clearly motivated more by his own pride than by my curiosity. So, I simply said, “Okay.”

He sang. He could not hold a tune, and he sped up in odd places only to slow much too abruptly. The beginning of the trader’s song had since eluded me, and I was no longer certain about its ending. However, what I could remember of the song had burrowed deep into my mind.

The daffodil had succumbed to the desert heat two days later. Since then, I had rebirthed it countless times, using whatever metals my aunties spared me from their work. And with each flower I crafted, I sang the little of the trader’s song that I knew, just as I did now.

“You listen to her tale
One her teacher always told
Of roads his son walked

Roads paved with petals of gold
See them bloom, see them shine
See this garden become a sky
With a thousand tiny suns
It's no lie, it's no lie
Light the world through the night
Keep this glow inside your heart
Flowers wilt, lands dwindle
But survival is in the art."

"Beautiful."

In my surprise, I nearly dropped my flower. Ahead of me, a man stood on the other side of the wall. His tattered tunic appeared brown, but when he rested his forearms on the wall and left an imprint, I realized the color was just dirt. He was a culmination of hard lines, from his strong jaw to his broad shoulders. The only soft thing about him was the smile he gave me.

I returned my attention to my flower. The man appeared too poor to place an order with my aunties, and had he meant me harm, he would have done so already. He was just a wanderer; if I ignored him, he would see there was nothing here and drift on elsewhere.

However, my silence did not seem to dissuade him. "The song was nice too," he remarked.

His Arabic was fluent, but he spoke with a strong Yorùbá accent. I curled one of the flower petals up, allowing it to bloom around the cup. Silence settled around me. For a moment, I believed the man had gone. Then—

"What's that you're making?"

I sighed. "It's a flower," I finally obliged, speaking in Yorùbá.

He looked pleasantly surprised. "You're from Yorùbáland?" he asked, switching to Yorùbá as well. In his native language, his voice was deeper and more mellow.

"My mother is. I've never left Timbuktu, but I grew up speaking Yorùbá with her."

"What is your name?"

I hesitated. Then, realizing I had no reason to care about what a beggar thought, I told him, "Òdòdó is the name I have chosen. But the name that was chosen for me is Alálẹ̀."

The man cupped his chin in his broad, bronze colored hand. "*Owners of the Earth*," he thoughtfully repeated my second name, which I shared with my aunties. "Ah. You're a witch."

I narrowed my eyes, peering at him closely. "You seem to have neither the naivete of youth nor the delirium of old age, yet you still believe that blacksmiths are witches?"

His grin widened; he had my full attention now, and he knew it. "You take the ore that Earth gifts us and transform it into deadly weapons or elegant jewelry. That must take magic."

"Because fire is too difficult to fathom."

He laughed. "That's fair," he said. "Although, I think I'd associate you more with rain. Your voice must be what moved the heavens to tears today."

Living in the desert, I had seen more than my fair share of sunny days. However, as I looked at the radiance with which the man's black eyes shone, I wondered if I had ever seen a light such as his.

I looked at my flower. It still lacked a stem, but the head alone was recognizable enough as a flower. I debated for a moment, then I rose.

As I approached him, the man straightened. There were not many people whom I needed to look up at, but he was an exception.

He allowed my examination with an amused patience. Up close, I saw that he had long curly hair wound into a black knot at the base of his head. A vertical scar ran over his left eye, from above his brow down to his cheek. It was the same mark I had seen on most of the Yorùbá soldiers—the mark of the Aláràá, a clan within the Yorùbá tribe. My mother was Aláràá as well, but since she was neither a man nor born into a prominent family, she did not bear the tribal mark.

There was another, longer scar trailing from the base of the man's neck to beneath his tunic. A token from battle, no doubt. Deep as the wound must have been, the spark in the stranger's gaze made me pity, not him, but rather the man he had fought.

For a vagrant, I decided, he was rather charming.

"Here," I said, holding out my flower. It had been intended for my sick auntie, but I could always make her another.

A dimple sank into the stranger's right cheek as he smiled. "You're giving me your flower?"

"It's not just a flower. It's a daffodil." My interaction with the trader all those years ago surfaced in my mind, and I added, "You said you liked my song. This daffodil may just sing it to you."

He laughed again. This time, I was close enough to feel the joy that emanated from him, warm and encompassing. It was a nice sound.

"In that case, how could I say no?" His calloused hand brushed my own as he accepted the flower.

"It'll fetch a nice price," I informed him. I hoped he would have the sense to trade it for a decent meal. Or at least a bath.

He smiled as he inspected the flower, though when he looked up, his expression had become more pensive. "What do you know of the Aláàfin?"

"The king of kings?"

He nodded, and I frowned. The question was unexpected—but then again, so was this entire conversation.

A falcon cried overhead. I watched it disappear into the horizon as I pondered the question. I knew that the Aláàfin presided over Yorùbáland from his city, Ṣàngótẹ̀. That he led a great army with which he had now conquered most regions west of the Niger.

Even if the stranger did not have a rugged physique, I would have known he was a soldier; every boy in Yorùbáland underwent rigorous military training that lasted well into adulthood. And the Aláàfin was said to be the most skilled fighter of them all. He had taken so many lives in battle that he was often referred to as the Commander of Death.

So, what I knew of the Aláàfin was what anyone else knew. But from the stranger's intense gaze, I gathered these were not the answers he sought.

At last, I shrugged. "When I was a child, I wanted to live in his stables."

The thin shell of hesitancy around the stranger's smile broke, and humor rushed forth freely. "His stables?"

I nodded unblushingly. "They say that the Aláàfin is so rich that he owns ten thousand horses, and each horse has their own mattress. They say that he has hundreds of slaves who keep his stables cleaner than most manors."

I glanced at my sandals. The leather was peeling, and my feet were constantly covered in dirt no matter how hard I scrubbed them—which I did not have time to do very often.

"Even just living in his stables would be better than the life I have now," I remarked softly.

"What if you truly could live with him?"

I looked at the stranger, amused. "What if I could grow a pair of wings to fly me to a bed of clouds?"

I laughed. The stranger did not. He opened his mouth and closed it. Then, he opened it once more. But before he could speak, there came a shrill call.

"*Òdòdó*."

I looked over my shoulder to see my mother, Okóbí, storming toward us. She was black and stout, like a block of ebony before it was carved. And just like ebony, the dark glimmer of her skin could distract the untrained eye from the resiliency of her rugged muscles.

Instinctively, I bent my knees in obeisance. "Good afternoon, ma," I said.

In response, she grabbed my upper arm and yanked me behind her. Scowling at the stranger, she said, "Our forges are in the front of the house."

The sharpness of Okóbí's voice pierced the toughest of men, but the stranger did not appear fazed. "And lovely forges they

are, I'm sure," he replied kindly. "But I am afraid that I am not here for a spear."

"Then you have no business with my daughter."

"I will keep that in mind for when I see her, but in this moment, all I see in front of me are two beautiful sisters."

He winked at me. A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth.

My mother, on the other hand, remained unamused. She had worked with far too many precious metals to be impressed by the silver of the stranger's tongue.

"Come back when you are in need of a spear," Okóbí said slowly, each word dropping with the weight of a stone.

The stranger's smile remained, but an odd glint appeared in his eyes, illuminating them—no, that was not it. There was a light, but it did not make his eyes shine. It made them blacker. Sharper.

It was gone so quickly that I might have imagined it, for in the next moment, the stranger inclined his head. "Of course." His eyes slid to my own, their charisma restored. "Farewell, Alálẹ̀ Òdòdó," he said.

The ghost of *for now* lingered in the air.

He buried his hands into his front pockets, the silver daffodil with them, and as he walked away, he whistled a tune that sounded suspiciously close to the daffodil's song. I found myself disappointed to see him go.

As soon as the man was out of sight, a long exhale seeped out of Okóbí. She whirled around and grasped my face in both of her hands, tilting it down.

"What did he want?" she demanded. Her touch was warm, but it was her black eyes that burned like flaming coals as they raked over my face. "What did he do to you? Did he touch you?"

"I'm fine," I assured her. "I only spoke to the man."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Her shoulders, which had been steadily climbing to her ears, dropped. "That's it," she repeated, almost to herself.

She reared her arm back and struck me across the face.

The sound whipped through the air as I staggered backwards. I held a hand to my cheek, attempting to numb the pain, but my warm touch only made it worse.

"That's it, she says!" Okóbí cried, her voice muffled by the ringing in my ears. "How many times have I said, do not speak to these beggars? Hm? How many times?"

She lifted her hand again. With a jolt, I quickly responded, "Many."

"Many, many times. Abeg, where do my words go? Do they float in the air until the wind blows them away? What is it about your head that they cannot enter?" she demanded, furiously jabbing two fingers to my temple. "Evil child, is it not enough to cause me misery? Must you allow a man to make your own life miserable as well?

"Listen well—that sorry story does not need to be told twice. I never want to see you so much as look at a man again. And you are *my* daughter, so when I give you instruction, you obey. Do you understand?"

Over the years, variations of this conversation had taught me that were I to say yes, she would accuse me of lying. Yet no was somehow an even worse answer. So, I gave her what she wanted: I dropped my gaze and waited patiently.

Sure enough, Okóbí sighed, like the final hiss of a quenched flame. "Go take inventory."

"Yes, ma."

As I walked away, I heard Okóbí mutter behind me, "She makes that silly flower again and again, yet she still does not understand that it would not have died had it not been beautiful enough to be picked in the first place."

2

Just like blood circulating in the body's veins, iron ore flowed through Earth's core. The strikes of two-handed basalt hammers against blistering metal echoed the cadence of the heart pumping life through the body. The two rhythms were nearly indistinguishable to me, each equally as intrinsic.

It did not matter what a blacksmith called herself; outsiders referred to us all with the same name, as though we were different parts of a single entity: Alálẹ̀. This name marked us as a group who knew the well-guarded secrets behind transforming Earth's most basic resource into objects of utility, empowerment, prestige, and art. There was a sort of magic in the intermingling of the elements of creation that smithing required: fire, air from the bellows to excite it, water to tame it, and earth for its shaper to stand upon.

Any woman deemed unnatural in the eyes of society was called a witch, but the word was especially associated with blacksmiths. And yet, outsiders could not be further from reality when they called us witches. There was nothing mystical about the permanent aches throughout my body from a lifetime of hunching over large flat rocks and hammering metals. There was nothing spellbinding about the burns and scars I had up and down my arms, gifts from molten iron and the fiery lungs of furnaces. But outsiders did not understand the complexity and brutality that was the process of manipulating the Earth, so they feared us. The slur *witch* was their only defense, for they could not get rid of us completely; smithing was necessary for the operation of

any empire. And west of the Niger, we were the only ones who could do it.

A dozen machetes that my aunties and I had just forged were lined up in the middle of the yard, their dark iron glimmering in the sunlight. Around me, my aunties rested. Knowing it would not be long before my mother assigned us a new task, most women stayed near their workstations, sitting where they could find shade and passing around skins of water.

I sat in the partial shadow of a large rock. The pile of charcoal next to me was the only one in the yard that was still lit. Last week, when a charming vagrant had visited my house, I had given him the last of my metal flowers. Thus, instead of using this rare free time to rest as my aunties did, I made more flowers.

From a thin sheet of gold, I used a knife to cut out three stars, each about the size of my palm. Their points were curved to resemble petals, and their centers were punctured by a tiny hole through which I would eventually stick a metal flower stem. I cut the remainder of my gold sheet into strips and plied them into short tubes, then centered each tube on a star before using tongs to hold it in the fire next to me. The flames' heat grazed my hands, but I hardly felt it with the sweltering sun beating down on me and slicking my skin with sweat. I slowly rotated the metal flower head until the cup fused to the petals, and once it cooled, I plied the petals upward so that they bloomed around the cup. From there, I inserted iron rods through the petals' base, then used fire one last time to fuse the stems to the flower heads.

I had just finished the last of the flowers when, over the crackle of fire, I heard someone say, "We were witches before, and we are witches now."

I looked behind me. Two of my aunties were huddled together, speaking in low voices. "A witch to the Songhai is different from a witch to these Yorùbá," the second auntie replied. "I cannot help but worry what is in store for us now that Timbuktu is part of Yorùbáland."

Apparently, I was not the only one whose attention had been

caught by their conversation; a third auntie, whose nose was adorned with a golden septum ring, spoke up. "You are right to worry," she said. "Remember, some of our sisters—myself included—are from Yorùbáland. We fled here because as neglected as we are in Timbuktu, it is infinitely preferable to the cruelty faced by witches in Yorùbáland."

The skeptical auntie's stubborn expression remained, but her shoulders sunk slightly, as though she could no longer pretend there was no weight bearing down on her. "But what can we do? There is nowhere to flee, not with the Aláàfin claiming all corners of the Earth."

"Even if there was somewhere else to run, I am not sure I would again," Septum Ring said. "I am tired of running only to be shunned wherever I go. I want somewhere I can stay and live in peace—even if I must fight for that peace."

By now, most of my aunties had paused their work to listen. Some were nodding, as though they were ready to take up arms alongside Septum Ring. But in the faces of most aunties, I saw my own shock reflected. Witches had no allies, and women had no strength; how could we fight the Aláàfin's great army?

"You have made so many weapons that you have fooled yourself into thinking you know how to use them?" a new voice said.

We all turned to see Okóbí walking out of the house, holding the meager medicine for my sick auntie, to come join the conversation. At the appearance of my mother, my other aunties quickly looked away, pretending they had not been listening. However, they stole furtive glances as Septum Ring replied, "I do not mean a physical fight. I just—perhaps there is something we can do to improve our conditions."

"And what do you propose we do?" Okóbí asked. "Speak up, because our voices are so heeded? Exhibit our scars, because the world has always felt so much sympathy for us? Tell me, as unimportant and helpless as you are, what can you do?"

As she spoke, the two aunties who had first spoken lowered their heads, their faces twisted in shame and frustration. Septum

Ring, however, bravely kept her eyes on Okóbí, even as they filled with tears.

"My sister," she said, "you are cruel."

"I am a mother. And you are filling my daughter's head with dangerous notions. This is the space we have been given in this world. No matter how small and how bleak, it is the only one we have." Okóbí looked around. "Back to work. We need to make seven iron spearheads. The man who placed the order is expecting them to be ready tomorrow. Let us complete our tasks so the state will continue to send us food. Each day we survive is enough of a victory."

Most of my aunties returned to their workstations unfazed; they had long accepted that hope was not something that belonged to them. But the aunties who had nodded at the prospect of fighting now looked defeated. Some scowled at me, and I wanted to tell them my mother had said that for my benefit but not with my blessing. However, one look from Okóbí, her black eyes challenging me to say anything at all, stopped me from speaking, and I quickly made to return to my own workstation.

But no sooner had I stood than a pounding of hooves sounded. Five men rode horses down the road and came to a stop in front of our house. Soldiers—recognizable as Aláràá by the vertical scar over their left eyes. They dismounted their horses and strolled into our yard, all the while chatting among themselves, as though they entered a public space and not our house.

The men walked around, inspecting our forges and furnaces with the same appraising looks they gave us, as though we were a continuation of the equipment. "I'd been excited to make use of Timbuktu's witches, for I have heard they are one of the most skilled guilds west of the Niger, and I am in desperate need of replacing my knife," one man remarked to his comrade. "But after seeing this hovel for myself, I am no longer sure we can get what we need."

"I assure you," said the auntie with a septum ring, "we are more than capable of making a few knives."

The soldiers' chatter lulled as they turned to her. My stomach must have recognized the disgust on their faces faster than my mind did, because I felt it churn before I could fully process why.

The man who had commented about the knives stepped up to my auntie with the septum ring and struck her across the face. The blow was so forceful that she was knocked off-balance. It happened too quickly for anyone to react; the rest of my aunties and I watched, frozen with shock, as Septum Ring crumpled to the ground.

The soldiers laughed. Amidst their laughter, the assailant said, "It is bad enough we must seek out witches. Please, keep our suffering to a minimum and do not speak unless in response to us."

Okóbí rushed to the soldiers and my fallen auntie. I expected her to yell at the soldiers for their impertinence, to subject them to the iron will that made my aunties respect her leadership and that had even cowed customers who overstepped their bounds in the past.

But instead, Okóbí merely helped my auntie to her feet. With her gaze lowered, Okóbí said, "She is sorry, sir. It will not happen again."

"See that it does not, Alálẹ̀. The Aláàfin has been kind to allow you to remain in his new city, but if you continue to disrespect his loyal soldiers, he may very well change his mind."

Okóbí nodded, still looking down. My mother was a short woman, but I had never seen her as small until now. Nor had I witnessed such blatant abuse toward my aunties; we may have been insulted and shunned, but we had never been harmed. We were protected by the state—or at least we had been.

Fear building within me, I looked back to the soldiers. My heart jumped when I met the eyes of a tall, burly man who had been staring at me. He grinned, flashing yellowed teeth that made me flinch.

Somehow, Okóbí noticed the man's interest in me, and she seemed to regain some of her usual intimidating aura as she

hurried to me. "Go sell your flowers in the market," she said in a low voice.

"I don't have many flowers right now," I said. "And I don't want to leave you. Those men might—"

Okóbí cut me off with an impatient smack of her lips. "Whatever they do, you cannot stop them. I have one less inconvenience if you are safely away while we take their order."

I opened my mouth to protest again, but Okóbí snapped, "Òdòdó, do not make me angry. I did not kill my mother, so you will not kill me. I said *go*."

The sun was only beginning to color the eastern sky, but the market was already a hive of activity. People swarmed around stands and tents, bartering and buying, singing and laughing.

I had just traded a gold flower for a fair price: a cube of salt roughly the same weight of the flower. Salt was the most valued commodity in the market, even more so than slaves, though those were a close second. Salt was required to preserve and season food, and it was essential for replacing what the body lost in sweat when traveling through the Sahara.

At the conclusion of our business, I said farewell to the salt vendor. As I wove through people and animals to search for a new customer, I passed by the gates of Sankoré University. The institution was what had earned Timbuktu its status as a premier intellectual center, boasting subjects ranging from languages to medicine to law.

Upon seizing Timbuktu in 1468, the Songhai had persecuted scholars in order to eliminate the possibility of them undermining authority. Many scholars had fled, but the newly established Yorùbá rule over the city seemed to have brought them back; the university's campus was the liveliest I had seen it in years.

When I noticed women among the scholars, I could not help but stop and stare. I had heard that women in Yorùbáland could

be scholars, musicians—anything except for soldiers. But after living under Islamic law for so long, it was strange to see women other than my aunties outside of a domestic setting.

Nevertheless, I knew I would never be among them. I had neither interest nor experience in scholarship, and given how unimpressive she found my mind, my mother would laugh at the idea of me being a student. No, the best way I could help her was by selling and trading my flowers.

I turned away from the university—only to nearly collide with a wall. When I stepped back, I saw that it was not a wall that had suddenly appeared in my path, but a man. He was as tall as me but twice as wide, and he bore the mark of the Aláràá clan.

When he smiled, I recognized his yellowed teeth—it was the same smile he had given me earlier, when he and his comrades had intruded into my house and assaulted my auntie. Fear gripped me as I realized that he must have followed me from my house to the market; perhaps my auntie had not been enough. Perhaps he meant me harm as well.

And yet his voice was amicable enough as he asked, "What's that you're holding?"

The question caught me off guard, but relieved it was not a threat instead, I held up my last two gold daffodils. "Flowers, sir. I'm trading them."

"Metal flowers made by a young witch." The slur was said with no hostility; he spoke neutrally and with a small nod, as though confirming something. "Come. Let us discuss business."

The statement felt like an order. I had no choice but to allow the man to guide me to a green tent.

As soon as I stepped inside, the shade provided cool relief. Set on the sandy floor were two crates. The soldier waved at one, and I reluctantly sat on its edge, ready to spring up at a moment's notice if needed.

As he poured a pitcher into a chipped wooden cup, he asked, "What will you take in exchange for one flower?"

"Whatever you can spare, sir," I said. I was not always so indifferent to the price of my labor, but I knew what I needed most from this trade was to leave unharmed.

"For someone living in Timbuktu, you do not drive a particularly hard bargain," he said with a chuckle.

When I did not share his amusement, his smile softened. To my confusion, something like sympathy colored his gaze.

"Very well then," he said. "In exchange for one of your flowers, I give you this refreshment."

He offered me the wooden cup. Although it pained me to complete such an unfair trade, I nodded stiffly, handed him a flower, and accepted the drink.

I made to leave the tent, but the man said, "Won't you humor me by telling me how it tastes? It is a recipe of my own creation."

I hesitated, but under the man's mostly friendly, slightly pitying smile, I nodded. I took a sip—only to pull back in surprise. It was as though the drink had expired; it slithered down my throat, sticking at points along the way.

I looked up at the soldier. This simple motion sent the world spinning. The man watched me intently as he swayed from side to side—or was I the one moving?

Black curled around the edges of my vision, dimming sound as well as light. I vaguely acknowledged that the cup had slipped out of my hand, though I was not sure when.

"Wait," I managed, but it was too late. I was already falling.

My senses returned one at a time. The swirling sound of unobstructed wind tumbling across the world. A vaguely rotten stench that coated my nostrils. Soft, damp ground beneath me, and rough bark digging into my bare shoulders and upper back.

I opened my eyes. Sand stretched endlessly in front of me, curving in the distance to meet the ink-black sky.

I shivered; the Sahara's nights were as cold as its days were

hot. Voices brought my attention to a small lake nearby. Standing at its moonlit shore were two men. Neither were the soldier who had tricked me. They wore the long woolen robes of travelers—which were caked with grime—and each of their heads and faces were covered by a litham so that only their eyes were visible. Judging from how they waved their hands about them, they were discussing the next steps of their trip—but to where?

Panic welled in my chest. I hauled myself to my feet with the help of the palm tree behind me, but as I looked around, any hope of escape shriveled. Beyond the island of green on which I stood was an endless sea of sandy dunes. I would not last long outside of this oasis.

A shout launched my heart into my throat. The men had noticed I was awake—one pointed at me. He crouched and, with his face turned to me, slowly scooped a waterskin in the lake, as if to make sure I did not miss a thing. Then he and the other man climbed up the short but steep lake bed. In my fright, I could only watch as they drew nearer until they were close enough for the first man to extend the waterskin to me.

"Water?"

I did not move; accepting a drink from a stranger was what had stranded me here in the first place. As if he could hear my suspicion, the man grunted and waved a hand behind him at the lake.

I realized he was right—this time, at least, I was certain of what he offered me; I had watched him collect the water myself. Cautiously, I took the waterskin and drank, draining the skin in two large gulps.

Wiping the back of my hand over my mouth, I returned the waterskin to the man. "Who are you?" I asked.

One man began speaking in a melodic language that was neither Arabic nor Yorùbá, the only two languages I spoke.

"I can't understand you," I interrupted. "Are you able to speak something else?"

I asked in Arabic, for that was what he had first spoken to me in, and I hoped he would return to it. But the two men merely looked at each other. Because their faces were covered, their bemusement was shown in other ways—the flick of one man's hands, the tilt of the other's head. Then, as one, they shrugged and turned back to me.

"Water," the first one repeated. The other nodded in agreement.

Of course—the stained woolen robes, the foreign tongue. These men did not just travel through the Sahara; they lived here.

I had heard of the desert nomads, the only people in existence who could navigate the desert using the position of the stars and the patterns left by the wind. Several kingdoms below the Sahara relied on them to uphold the vital trade of salt from their mines in Taghaza.

Taghaza. A chill ran down my neck. That must be where these men were taking me, to that desolate city in the middle of the Sahara. I knew criminals and captives were sold to Taghaza, but I never thought nomads *took* slaves themselves.

I could not survive a week in Taghaza. Even for men much stronger and healthier than I, the salt mines were a death sentence.

I took a slow, shaky breath, and I released it just as slow. Then I launched into a sprint.

The nomads were faster. I had not taken more than a couple of steps when my wrist was yanked back. Caught off balance, I stumbled back into a torso and a pair of arms snaked around me.

"No!" I shrieked as I struggled against my captor in vain. "Let me go!"

A guttural sound vibrated within the man's chest—a command. I kicked and screamed, but that did not stop the second man from smashing a wet, dirty cloth against my face.

An acrid scent stung my nose, burning a path to my temples.

My vision blurred, sharpened, then darkened. Gradually, my body failed to obey my screaming mind.

The last thing I saw was the nomad. His voice was a distant buzz, and his free hand waved next to him as he and his companion continued discussing their travel plans while I blacked out.

When I next regained consciousness, the men were gone.

Traces of whatever herb had been on the nomad's cloth lingered in the back of my mind, pressing dully against my eyes. I lifted myself from scarlet cushions to observe my new plush surroundings. I had seen enough rich men to know that I was in a palanquin, though until now I had never seen the interior of one. They were gallant displays of wealth—and a rather inefficient method of travel for a journey to Taghaza.

I pulled back a netted curtain, and sunlight poured inside. I blinked rapidly, hoping that each time my eyes opened, my mind would be better able to make sense of the sight before me.

A polished stone road gleaming in sunlight. Patches of green grass overflowing with colorful flowers. Towering mud buildings with gilded accents creeping up their sides like golden vines. Older men in fine tunics, gold woven in their curly beards. Clusters of giggling women dressed in vibrant wrappers and dresses. Music drifting lazily over tall trees that waved at me with green fingers.

The heat here was heavier. I was not in the salt mines, but I had not returned to Timbuktu either. I had only heard storytellers speak of one city so lush: Ṣàngótẹ̀, the city in which the Aláàfin of Yorùbáland resided.

Panic twisted my insides. Ṣàngótẹ̀ was in the Sahel, the shores of the Sahara; why would I be deposited in the south when that only prolonged the journey north to Taghaza?

Eventually, the palanquin came to a halt before a massive

stone barrier. Parapets and towers dotted the very top of the wall, where bowmen stood watch next to white puffs of clouds. A man yelled, my dread muddling his words in my ears, and a loud creak ground through the air. The gates opened inward, but not before I saw a bronze emblem engraved into them.

The emblem was the silhouette of three elephant heads: one looking to the past, one to the future, and the middle one facing forward, looking directly at the present. Their trunks were curved upward, their mouths open in a silent war cry. The image was so widespread that it had been well-known in Timbuktu even before the Yorùbá had captured the city. Every man, woman, and child west of the Niger knew it. It was the pin that held soldiers' capes, the imprint in the wax that sealed official envelopes, the design that could be found on pots and rugs on every street corner.

It was the symbol of the Aláàfin.

I sat, numb with shock, as the palanquin proceeded through the gates. So great was the Aláàfin's compound that they did not call it a palace, as with other kings, but rather *the royal city*.

Stretching all around me were stone paths, of which every other brick was paved with bronze. The paths cut through trimmed grass fields that held elaborate mud buildings, each with domed roofs and doors accented with gold and bronze. The scene shone so brightly that it was difficult to tell if it was the sun that illuminated them or the other way around.

There were barracks for soldiers and living quarters for slaves. There were entire houses, complete with gates and gardens, for the Aláàfin's court to live in with their families. I passed storehouses of food, fabrics, and weapons. I glimpsed mountains of copper, cowrie shells, and bronze within treasuries that were heavily guarded by soldiers with iron spears. At some point, I heard scattered brays and a faint pounding of hooves, but before I could peek out the other side of the palanquin, I had turned the corner to begin down another vast path.

The splendor was as unsettling as it was astonishing. By the

time the palanquin finally came to a halt, I was cold with fear. I was lowered to the ground slowly—though my stomach still dropped abruptly—and two of my carriers came around to pull me out. They guided me up a short flight of ivory steps leading to a lavish curtain draped over the entrance of a stone building. Four women waited in front of it, their humble attire indicating that they were slaves.

The men handed me off to the women, who respectfully knelt on the ground—thanking the men, I assumed—before ushering me into the building. Immediately, a cloud of steam bestowed damp kisses on my skin. High walls, some lined with latrines, were without a ceiling to connect them, allowing sun to stream freely onto the pool at the center of the room. My disrobing was strikingly efficient, and I was soon lowered into the sparkling water and immersed in the scent of jasmine as well as the women's incessant stream of compliments.

"You're gorgeous, my dear—isn't she gorgeous?"

"Yes-o, see how smooth her skin is!"

"Such beautiful brown eyes!"

Standing around me in their smallclothes, the women loosened my cornrows so that my hair floated in a massive black cloud around me. They scrubbed me from scalp to sole, their black soap and netted cloths stripping away layer after layer of grime.

Their overlapping voices and the overwhelming perfume made my head swim. I could not understand why the women were being so kind. As they guided me out of the water, wrapped me in a silk robe, and slid my feet into soft slippers, I thought of Okóbí. My mother never liked me out of her sight for long; what did she make of my absence? Even if she somehow discovered I had been sold into slavery, I did not know if there was anything she could do about it—I did not know if there was anything she *would* do. All I had ever caused her was grief. Maybe she would think it was better this way.

The women ushered me out the bathhouse, to a large field

bordered by a mud wall. Guards posted at the opening of the wall nodded to us as we walked through. Within was yet another one of the royal city's neighborhoods, made up of large mud-brick huts. Groups of richly dressed women paused in their conversations to stare as I walked by.

I was saved from their scrutiny as the slave women brought me into a hut. The single room was more spacious than any other hut I'd ever seen; nearly the size of a small house, it easily held a velvet divan, a fine wooden table and stool, and a handful of small bronze statues. There was even a bed, its raised wood frame supporting a wool-stuffed mattress swathed in linen sheets. On one end of the bed sat a curved wooden headrest, the base of which was lacquered with gold. I knew this could not be my dwelling; as rich as the Aláàfin was, it was unlikely he would spare the luxury of furniture for a slave.

The women nudged me onto a stool then walked to a table laden with glass containers of varying shapes, sizes, and colors. I was unsure what to make of them until the women each grasped two and turned to me.

Still showering me with compliments, they navigated around my robe to work oils, butters, and perfumes into my hair and skin until my limbs glowed black. A butter that smelled like ripe mangoes was massaged into my face, and the scent was sweet enough to renew my hunger pains.

"This is her?" a soft voice cut through the chatter.

A new woman had entered the room. She was shorter and skinnier than me, but the lines that crinkled at the corners of her eyes told me she had been smiling for longer than I had been alive. Hanging from one of her arms was a dress made of aṣọ òkè fabric. She carefully placed it on the table before turning back to me. She held up a hand, and, as one, the other women stepped back, suddenly quiet with their heads bowed.

"I am Ìgbín, the tailor who attends to the women of the royal city," the newcomer said. Her words came quickly but were not rushed; she spoke with the speed and precision of someone who

knew exactly what they wanted to say and who intended to say only that, not a breath more.

Ìgbín raised a jumble of fabric that unfurled down into a long blue strip. “May I?”

I eyed the cloth warily, but when I looked back at Ìgbín, my apprehension eased. Her smile was kind, the first humanizing encounter I had since arriving. I realized that over the course of the past few days, I had somehow been attended to the point of neglect.

My shoulders lifted, and my head jerked forward. Accepting this cross of a shrug and a nod as consent, Ìgbín began wrapping the strip around my waist, arms, shoulders. I felt nothing; I only saw flashes of blue winding around me.

“Typically,” she said as she worked, “I will attend to you first thing in the morning, so please forgive my tardiness today. I was not informed of your existence until moments after your arrival.”

She stepped back and began rolling the strip into a ball, apparently finished, though I had not seen her write anything down. “Because I am not yet familiar with your tastes,” she continued, “I have brought you one of my previous pieces, recently worn for the same occasion. I will make adjustments for you now.”

Ìgbín was silent for a moment. With a jolt, I realized that she awaited a response. I gave her a stiff nod, and she raised a brow, her brown eyes searching.

Then she said gently, “I am sure this is scary, but have no fear. You will make a lovely bride.”

My heart came to a grinding halt. *Bride?*

Ìgbín met my blank stare with a smile then turned to the dress she had brought. It took a few beats before my heart was able to restart, and my mind with it.

“What do you mean, *bride*?” I asked hoarsely.

Behind me, a murmur passed through the women who had attended to me. Ìgbín looked at me, and when she saw the sincerity in my face, her disbelief grew.

"You are unaware?" she asked, slightly incredulous. Her eyes darted to the women, and I followed her gaze. I briefly caught the varying expressions of humor and horror my attendants wore before they saw that I was looking and wiped their faces into polite, blank smiles.

Ìgbín's hands closed around one of my own, bringing my attention back to her. There was sympathy in her smile now.

"My dear, you are to be the bride of the Aláàfin."