



IRAYA

By dawn's light, a crimson wound that takes its time bleeding through the enormity of dusk, the Deleterious Doll takes its form between my fingers.

Half my focus is on the grass I weave, strands of hair hastily plucked from my head dispersed throughout. The remainder is on Delyse, the slow pull and give of her breaths. It isn't our earlier trek of the peninsula alone that tired her. Slumped against a felled tree in our camp, hers is a plant-induced slumber.

If I were a gods-fearing witch, I might have believed the dogwood I came across earlier, endemic to coastal zones such as this craggy peninsula, was put before me by Sofea, the Mudda's Face of Pathways. Either way it was a stroke of fate that enlightened me as to how I should step: as we set our guzzu to protect our camp for the second and final night, I fumbled enough that Delyse added poor dexterity to the list of grievances she has with me, leaving her to work alone

and thus inhale the sedative flower I concealed in the grass. It didn't take long for her to fall prey to its debilitating, but otherwise harmless, spores. Ones, I find, with a shake of my head and widening of heavy eyes, I'm fighting the effects of myself. A small price to pay when, should I step quick, most of the Impediment Glyphs Doyenne Cariot incised deep behind my ears can be burned away before Delyse wakes and Shamar returns from his watch to find me missing. As for Kirdan . . . though I cannot see him, I turn to where he's spent almost two straight days resting above this verdant declivity, atop the rocky ledge overlooking the sea where I dashed whatever we might have been to the mercy of the rocks and waves below. With the strength in his hair reduced after Jazmyne had it hacked away, he should sleep awhile yet.

I haven't.

Each time my eyes close, I'm plagued by one thought: *They know how this will end.*

Them. The shadows in my periphery. Always there, but never discerned. Not even now, no matter how closely I scour my memory. For Them. The nebulous clouds that hid themselves in skies they were aware I've only ever known to be stormy. Obeah, once. Ilk, once. . . . No more. If the insurgents wanted to tussle for Aiyca, they needn't have twisted my arm with a force of monsters from the other side of the veil. Aligning themselves with the Alumbrar to kill my family was more than enough to coax me into the ring—where I won't simply bring them war. I will introduce them to Death.

Slipping away from the camp, I fold myself into the shadows within the knot of dense vegetation. At once my skin becomes

damp beneath the weight of the oppressive heat below the canopy. In the dark, I will my conduit to light. After several tries, returning to Delyse's fundamental of imagining my magic as Aiyca's Great River, golden light spills across the ground, only just illuminating my path. A further push of will, of want, incites a tendril of cool breeze to brush across my temple. Busy weighing the time I have left until Shamar returns from his watch, where I might find a beast to bleed to summon the ancestors, and my distance from the camp, it takes a moment to realize something is amiss. The hairs on the back of my neck rise as my survival instincts tell me I am no longer alone. That, perhaps, I never was.

"You'd make a lousy Stealth," I say.

Made, Shamar steps out of the shadow of a trunk to my left. My relief that it's him, not Delyse, is extinguished by the tautness in his body; he stands tall, ready for battle.

"That depends on what I was keeping an eye on."

Who.

The smile I flash Shamar is more a show of teeth. "I wasn't going to run, back at the palace." It's the first time I've been able to explain myself to any of them since arriving here, against my will, in Kirdan's arms. I tried with Delyse, but she's ignored me since I told her of my plan to head to the Skylands two nights ago. Not even my intention to recruit their extensive aerial army to fight the Unlit has thawed her. "You didn't figure that out when the army of the dead came? You know, the skeletons I raised from an ancestor's tomb that saved our lives and enabled our escape from the palace?"

Shamar's face doesn't budge. "And now?" he asks.

“Now I was—I was trying to free my magic.” The truth is light in a way I’ve never known it to be before. But then, what use are lies when we face the possibility of war? And Shamar has always appreciated the need for soldiers.

Folding his long arms across the dark tunic on his chest, he nods for me to continue.

“I can see why you’d doubt my intentions when I’ve done nothing these past few months but fight to avenge my family. A personal vendetta? Yeh mon. A selfish one?” I swallow as the truth finally weighs what I always thought it would. “Maybe. But I’m not myopic by nature. You know that. My plans for after the doyen’s death would have helped Aiyca.”

Curiosity softens in Shamar’s expression, maybe some guilt too. “What were they?”

“I would have searched for my coven, rejoined them. If they still lived.”

“And if they didn’t?”

Guileless, a rare occasion, I shrug again. “I still would have helped my order, *our* order, regardless. You see my scarification; you saw me fight the pirates back at the palace.”

“You’ll fight for us, I understand, but what about leading us?”

Grateful for the darkness, I turn from him, from a truth unlike the others; if I buckle beneath it, Shamar would break. “You don’t need an empress now. *We* don’t. For one thing, there’s no throne to keep warm.” At that, Shamar huffs a small laugh. Progress. “Doyenne Cariot had Aiyca, ruled Aiyca, and the Unlit still came.” The enemy she allied with to kill my family, before betraying them and setting us all on this bloody course. “Politics can do little against a sword when it’s already

falling.” I take a step closer to Sham, allowing the glow from his conduit to illuminate my sincerity, rather than knocking it into him. “Though it looks different to what you want, helping our home has always been in my plans. I overcame the Vow of Protection to kill the doyenue. If you won’t trust my words, trust that action. We need a Genna. We need to raise a sword and parry, or face losing Aiyca to the Unlit.” Being stripped of their magic doesn’t mitigate their threat. They’re Obeah. There is no greater threat to my parents’ legacy.

Surveying me, Shamar rubs his chin, fingers dragging back and forth across the horizontal row of scars there. Is he trained to identify poison in words too? Can he tell my intentions, this time, are pure? Mostly.

“You’re not wrong,” he eventually says. Dropping his hand, he sighs. “I’ll help with your magic.”

My brows shoot upward.

“But we won’t tell Delyse. Or Kirdan. She was . . . hurt that you hid who you were from us at Cwenburg, your plan to kill Doyenne Cariot. So was I.” His eyes darken with something that makes my stomach clench. “And the Zesian I’m not sure we should entirely trust.”

Smart.

“I’m not sure about trusting you either.”

Smarter.

“So if I put my faith in you, Iraya—”

“I would be putting mine in you also.”

And though neither of us mention our use of *if* and *would be*, Shamar tracks down a beast while I arrange the Bidding Circle.

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We're unsuccessful in burning the Impediment Glyphs away in full.

It's understandable since the doyenne incised the symbols down to my bone. Still, I'd hoped to last longer than several minutes before passing out.

"Enough." Shamar is supporting my head in his lap when I wake the second time. "The day is long. When we move on from here, we can find a Bush Healer to treat you properly. If you die on my watch, no one will forgive me. Least of all myself."

Sticky with sweat and fever, I couldn't fight him even if I was sure I wanted to. What I have access to will need to be enough.

Once I've recovered enough to stand, we return to camp. Me with a pocket full of allspice leaves to chew whenever the burned skin behind my ears pulsates with pain. Shamar with serious doubts in his eyes whenever he looks my way. Kirdan crests the hill along with the sun. Prince Divsylar. General of his island's military of lauded bastards. As he raises his cloak, we lock eyes; the skin beneath them is smudged with purple bruising and yesterday's smoky kohl. The two of us haven't been alone since he confessed the truth about the Unlit, their plans for war, and the feelings he had. For me.

"We move out in five." Rough from sleep, Kirdan's voice is all edge. His focus is acute too; those eyes like shards of emerald cut a path down the baggy pants and tunic I swapped my shield uniform with, for clothing he provided last night.

Shamar clears his throat. "Sounds good to me."

Turning from Kirdan, I head over to the fire and refuse to look up while I fix a breakfast of cold fish. This is sure to be a long day, journeying with him and his long stares to the Skylands. Gods give me strength.

Once Delyse has been shaken awake—hard enough that Shamar sends a suspicious eyebrow lift my way—we four leave the verdant peaks of the peninsula, sifting somewhere I’m not privy to. A necessity, Kirdan explained when he took my hand, since the secrecy tricks the Shook Bargain around my wrist into believing I’m being moved against my will, preventing the magical agreement from activating its seven-day countdown for me to leave Aiyca for good. As to whether it will work when I tell them we’re going to the Skylands remains to be seen.

Once we’re spat out of the breathless cyclone of magic, rather than the invisible band around my wrist, it is the prince my attention turns to. That sift was rougher than others I’ve had with him. Unsteady after the magical expenditure of the travel, he relinquishes my hand and braces against a wall in the cramped ginnel with a wince; his ruined locks scissor past wan cheeks in jagged black blades. Before he catches me in the beam of that unrelenting focus, I turn away, pretend I don’t see what I suspected before we left: that the days he slept have done little to restore his strength. Good for me, now we’re in the Skylands. Shamar and Delyse have just as little gold as I do, with none of my training. If need be, escape is all but guaranteed. Seeking a higher vantage, I throw my focus to the mercy of a sky now heavy with the burden of a triumphant dawn—a familiar sky at that.

These bandulu have brought me home.

“Why in the gods’ names have we returned to *Aiyca*,” I say, my voice low with a deadly calm, “when we all agreed that there’s an army to recruit in the Skylands? *The* army we need to save this island, in case I wasn’t clear two nights ago.”

“Is there internal change with the Shook Bargain?” Shamar, who I thought was my partner in deceit, scans me from head to toe. “I’ve heard the pain starts in the mind.”

“None.” *Not to the partially burned glyphs behind my ears, or the Shook Bargain.* “No pain anywhere.” *The Deleterious Doll was a success.* “Now—”

“We can all hear she’s fine,” Delyse cuts in. “Concealing where we travel is still tricking the bargain into believing movement is against her will.”

My eyebrows hike up. *Her?*

“Bringing me back to *Aiyca* certainly is that.”

Delyse doesn’t even look my way. “We have a plan.”

“We would imply *all*.”

“You’re going to have to trust us.” Her voice is heavy with sarcasm. “Or, we can knock you out each time we move and wake you when we arrive.” *Try me*, the pinched expression on her face begs. *Please.*

“What about once we’ve reached our destination,” I push, swatting at a buzzing blood eater rather than Delyse. “As we have now. You can tell me the next steps, surely?”

“We’ll share what we can, when we can,” Shamar evades.

My mouth twitches, fighting words that would scorch the earth between us beyond revival. Here it is, the dictating, the control. Autonomy and ruling are not synonymous, as many

believe. As I knew. In Aiyca, a crown doesn't give you a voice. It takes it away.

"You'll know soon enough, Iraya." The authority in Kirdan's tone succeeds in making Shamar and Delyse stand down. "There is conviction to be gained on all sides."

Indeed.

I won't tell them, for instance, that while the late Doyenne Cariot is dead, her usurper is *still* Doyenne Cariot, and, last I heard two nights ago, very much alive, nullifying my part of the agreement to leave Aiyca in seven days and stay away for good. Not when all Delyse, Kirdan, and even Shamar continue to show me is that they're adept at deception—one they tie off with a bow, dressing it up as something *for my own good*. Or worse still, *for the greater good*.

If subterfuge is currency around here, I can pay my way with the richest.

"We'll discuss matters more later," Kirdan, who seems to have assigned himself the role of de facto leader—*irritating*—goes on to say. "For now, we have somewhere to be."

For now, I listen.

Nana Clarke would say to bend the tree while it's young; before day gives way to night, I might have to cut the Taciturn Trio loose and move on to the Skylands, alone.

Just-Ira.

They wanted me to fight; that is the danger of backing me into a corner. Everyone becomes an enemy.