

RAYBEARER

BY JORDAN IFUEKO

## CHAPTER 1

I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED THAT fairies exist.

When elephants passed by in a lumbering sea beneath my window, flecks of light whispered in the dust, dancing above the rows of tusks and leather. I leaned precariously over the sill, hoping to catch a fleck before a servant wrestled me inside. "Shame-shame, Tarisai," my tutors fretted. "What would The Lady do if you fell?" "But I want to see the lights," I said. "They're only *tutsu* sprites." A tutor herded me away from the window. "Kind spirits. They guide lost elephants to watering holes." "Or to lion packs," another tutor muttered. "If they're feeling less kind."

Magic, I soon learned, was capricious. When I squinted at the swollen trunk of our courtyard boab tree, a cheeky face appeared. *Kye, kye, killer-girl*, it snickered before vanishing into the bark. I was seven when the man with cobalt- fire wings found me. That night, I had decided to search Swana, the second- largest realm in the Arit empire, for my mother. I had crept past my snoring maids and tutors, stuffed a sack with mangoes, and scaled our mudbrick wall. The moon hung high above the savannah when the *alagbato*, the fairy, appeared in my path. The light glinted in his gold- flecked eyes, which slanted all the way to his dark temples. He seized the back of my garment, hoisting me up for examination. I wore a wrapper the color of banana leaves wound several times beneath my arms, leaving my shoulders bare. The *alagbato* watched me, amused, as I punched and kicked the air. *I'm in bed at Bhekina House*, I told myself. My heart pounded like a fist on a goatskin drum. I bit my cheek to prove I was dreaming. *I'm wrapped in gauzy mosquito nets and the servants are fanning me with palm fronds. I can smell breakfast in the kitchens. Maize porridge. Stewed matemba fish . . .* But my cheek began to throb. I was not in bed. I was lost in the balmy Swanian grasslands, and this man was made of flames.

"Hello, Tarisai." His Sahara breath warmed my beaded braids. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"How do you know my name?" I demanded. Were *alagbatos* all- knowing, like Am the Storyteller?

"I am the one who gave it to you."

I was too angry to absorb this reply. Did he have to be so *bright*? Even his hair shimmered, a luminous thicket around his narrow face. If our compound guards spotted him . . .

I sighed. I had barely made it a mile into the savannah. Capture now would be humiliating. My tutors would lock me up again— and this time, *every* window in Bhekina House would be nailed shut.

"I'm not allowed to be touched," I snapped, clawing at the alagbato's grip. His skin felt smooth and hot, like clay left to harden in the sun.

"Not allowed? You are small enough to be carried. I am told human children need affection."

"Well, I'm not human," I shot back in triumph. "So put me down."

"Who told you that, little girl?"

"No one," I admitted after a pause. "But they all say it behind my back. I'm not like other children."

This was possibly a lie. The truth was, I'd never *seen* other children, except in the market caravans that passed Bhekina House from a distance. I would wave from my window until my arms grew sore, but they never waved back. The children would stare straight past me, as if our compound— manor, orchard, and houses enough to make a small village— were invisible to anyone outside.

"Yes," the alagbato agreed grimly. "You are different. Would you like to see your mother, Tarisai?"

I stopped resisting at once, and my limbs hung limp as vines. "Do you know where she is?" My mother was like morning mist: here, then gone, vanished in clouds of jasmine. My tutors bowed superstitiously whenever they passed her wood carving in my study. They called her *The Lady*. I delighted in our resemblance: the same high cheekbones, full lips, and fathomless black eyes. Her carving watched as my study brimmed with scholars from sun-up to moonrise. They chattered in dialects from all twelve realms of the Arit empire. Some faces were warm and dark, like mine and The Lady's. Others were pale as goat's milk with eyes like water, or russet and smelling of cardamom, or golden with hair that flowed like ink. The tutors plied me with riddles, shoving diagrams into my hands. *Can she solve it? Try a different one. She'll have to do better than that.*

I didn't know what they were looking for. I only knew that once they found it, I would get to see The Lady again. *This will be the day*, the tutors gushed when I excelled at my lessons. *The Lady will be so pleased*. Then the palisade gates of Bhekina House opened, and my mother glided inside, detached as a star. Her shoulders glowed like embers. Wax-dyed cloth clung to her torso like a second skin, patterns zigzagging in red, gold, and black. She held me to her breast, a feeling so lovely I wept as she sang: *Me, mine, she's me and she is mine*.

The Lady never spoke when I demonstrated my skills. Sometimes she nodded as if to say, *Yes, perhaps*. But in the end, she always shook her head. *No. Not enough*. I recited poems in eight different languages, hurled darts into miniscule targets, solved giant logic puzzles on the floor. But each time it was no, no, and no again. Then she vanished in that haze of heady perfume.

At age five I had begun to sleepwalk, padding barefoot through the smooth plaster halls of our manor. I would peer in each room, walking and whimpering for my mother until a servant carried me back to bed. They were always careful never to touch my skin.

"I cannot find your mother," the alagbato told me the night of my attempted escape. "But I can show you a memory. Not in my head." He dodged my attempt to seize his face. "I never store secrets on my person."

The Lady had forbidden people from touching me for a reason. I could steal the story of almost anything: a comb, a spear, a person. I touched something and knew where it had been a moment before. I saw with their eyes, if they had eyes; sighed with their lungs; felt what their hearts had suffered. If I held on long enough, I could see a person's memories for months, even years. Only The Lady was immune to my gift. I knew every story in Bhekina House, except hers.

"You will have to take my memory from the place where it happened," said the alagbato, setting me lightly in the tall grass. "Come. It is not far."

He offered a bony hand, but I hesitated. "You're a stranger," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and I felt the odd sensation of peering into a mirror. He smiled, lips pursed like a meerkat's.

"If it makes you feel any better, my name is Melu. And thanks to *that woman*, I am not an alagbato." His smile soured into a grimace. "Not anymore."

Fear rose in my belly like smoke from a coal pit, but I silenced my worries. *Do you want to find The Lady or not?* I picked up my sack, from which most of the mangoes had fallen, and took Melu's hand. Though gentle, his grip felt hard around mine, as though his muscles were made of bronze. An emerald-studded cuff glinted on his forearm, and when I grazed the cuff by accident, it seared me.

"Careful," he murmured.

We walked to a clearing hedged in acacia trees. Herons flapped above a vast, still pool. The air hung with lilies and violets, and the brush rustled and *shhhed* in a wordless lullaby.

"Is this where you live?" I asked in awe.

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "It was beautiful for the first few thousand days. After that, it grew tedious."

I blinked up at him in confusion, but he did not explain. He only pointed to the soft red earth. "The story is here."

Cautiously, I pressed my ear to the ground. I'd never tried to take the memory of any place larger than my bedroom.

A familiar heat flushed my face and hands as my mind stole into the dirt, latching onto whatever memory was strongest. The winged man and the flock of herons disappeared.

The clearing is younger now, with fewer brush and acacia trees. It is daytime in this memory, and the amber pool is clear, free of fish and mayflies. My heart skips a beat: The Lady, my Lady, reclines on a rock by the water. The sun makes a mosaic of her reflection on the pool's surface, distorting her face, rippling her cloud of midnight hair. Her wrapper is frayed, and her sandals are worn to the soles. I worry, wondering: *What were you running from, Mother?*

The Lady dips an emerald cuff into the water. She murmurs over the jewel, kissing it tenderly, and the emerald glows and fades. Then she sets the cuff down and calls out,

"Melu." My mother tastes the word on her full lips, drawing out the syllables like a song.

"Melu, my dear. Won't you come out and play?"

The clearing is silent. The Lady laughs, a deep, throaty sound. "The seers say that alagbatos dislike humans. Some doubt you even exist, Great Melu, guardian of Swana. But I think you do hear." She produces a green vial from her pocket and tips it precariously toward the pool. "I think you hear just fine."

A hot wind rushes into the clearing, swirling up dirt and clay into a tall, lean man. His wings smolder cobalt blue, like a young fire, but his voice is frost cold. "*Stop.*"

"I would tell you my name," The Lady tells him. "But as you know, my father never gave me one." She pauses, still dangling that vial over the pool. "How quickly does *abiku* blood spread through earth and water, Melu? How much would poison every living thing within a fifty-mile radius? Two drops? Three?"

"Don't," Melu barks. "Wait."

The Lady points to the emerald cuff. Melu's features contort with defeat. Stone-jawed, he picks up the cuff and snaps it on his forearm.

"If I've done that right," says The Lady, "you are no longer Swana's alagbato. You are my ehru . . . my djinn."

"Three wishes," Melu spits. "And I am bound to this grassland until your wishes are complete."

"How convenient." The Lady sits, thoughtfully dangling her muscular brown legs in the water. "Melu, I wish for a stronghold that no one may see or hear unless I desire it. A place my friends and I will always be safe. A place . . . befitting royalty. That is my first command."

Melu blinks. "It is done."

"Where?"

“A mile from here.” Melu points, and the newly blossomed plaster walls of Bhekina House shimmer in the distance.

The Lady glows with pleasure. “Now,” she breathes, “I wish for Olugbade’s death—”

“Not allowed,” Melu snaps. “Life and death are beyond my power. *Especially* that life. Even fairies may not kill a Raybearer.”

The Lady’s mouth hardens, then relaxes. “I thought that might be the case,” she says.

“Fine. I wish for a child who will do, think, and feel as I tell it. An extension of myself. A gifted child, sure to stand out in a contest of talent. This is my second command.”

“Not allowed,” Melu intones again. “I cannot force a human to love or hate. You may not *own* a child as you own an ehru.”

“Can’t I?” The Lady steeples her fingers in thought. A smile spreads across her face, and her teeth are coldly white.

“What if,” she says, “my child *was* an ehru? What if my child was yours?”

Melu grows as rigid as a tree in dry season. “Such a union would go against nature. You are human, not of my kind. You ask for an abomination.”

“Oh no, Melu.” The Lady’s brilliant black eyes dance over the ehru’s horrified ones. “I command that abomination.”

They performed a ritual then, one I didn’t understand at seven years old. It looked painful, the way his body folded over hers in the grass. Two species never meant to unite, dissimilar as flesh against metal. But the memory told me that nine months later, my infant cries rang through Bhekina House. And The Lady’s third ungranted wish—her abomination—ran through my veins.

“Do you understand now?” Melu muttered over my drowsy form, once the memory had run its course. “Until you grant her third wish, neither you nor I will be free.”

He touched my forehead with a long, slender finger. “I bargained with The Lady for the privilege of naming you Tarisai. It is a Swana name: *behold what is coming*. Your soul is hers for now. But your name, I insisted, must be your own.”

He sounded far away. Stealing The Lady’s story had exhausted me. I barely sensed Melu cradle me in his narrow arms, soar through the night, and deposit me back at the palisade gates of Bhekina House.

He whispered, “I’ve been bound to this savannah for seven years. For my sake, I hope that woman claims her wish. But for your sake, daughter, I hope that day never comes.”

Then servants clambered toward the gates, and Melu was gone.

A dozen anxious hands put me to bed, and syrupy voices soothed me when I babbled about Melu the next day. *It was all a dream*, the tutors said. But their dilated pupils and terse smiles told a different story. My adventure had confirmed their most sinister suspicions. My mother was the devil, and I, her puppet demon.