

THE RETURN OF THE EARTH
MOTHER SERIES: BOOK 2

DESCENDANTS
OF THE
FIRST

PRAISE FOR THE RETURN OF THE EARTH MOTHER SERIES

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PROLOGUE

Urukuru

A sigh escaped Nwamara's lips as her claws sank into snow for the first time in decades. The bird-woman hadn't realised how much she had missed the biting cold against her warmed skin. It provided a little respite from the heaviness tugging at her chest, drawing her to memories of a different time. A different world.

The sun kissed the floating land; its light rays beamed off the clouds that bordered the sky city's edge. Urukuru, the wonder in the sky. Nwamara let the snow fall through her claws. She didn't understand this new world. It had no gods. It had no Mother. Yet, it had *something*. A whisper of magic in the air. She stretched out her wings. Whatever it was, it had changed her. Though the thought was not sad, it filled her eyes with tears. They fell, wet and fat, melting the frost that had formed on her cheeks.

'Nwanne-nwanyi Nwamara?' Nene said. 'What is the matter?' Her auburn feathers had sprung up, and her thin body tremored.

Nwamara's jaw stiffened. It wasn't the first time that Nene had forgotten to use the human tongue. How many times must she lecture the little nnuu? When would Nene finally understand that, if she hoped to survive what was coming, she *had* to practise. The bird-woman cowered under Nwamara's glare, a sight that made her chest squeeze. *What will we do with you?*

'Here,' she said gently in the human tongue, stretching her wing out to the gnarled bunch of vines before them. This was it. This was what had called her the

day that Ochichiri, the Eze, the ruler of the Kingdom, had returned to dust. That day she had woken up with the gift of flight. That day everything had changed. Nwamara regarded the dried entanglement of vines and she waited.

When it finally began to move, Nwamara had been coated with frost. She glanced at Nene, her reddish-brown feathers lost beneath a blanket of snow. How long had they been waiting for? Nwamara couldn't tell. As the vines sprang to life before her, lurching out this way and that like a sprawling babe, she realised that it didn't matter.

Her heart lodged in her throat as the taste of death sprouted into her beak. Was that what she had been called for? Her end. Her return to dust? Wasn't that what had happened to Ketandu? The nnunu had been called to the sea, only for it to claim her last breath. Nwamara's heart raced at the thought.

'What will be, will be,' she sang, as a glow broke through the vines. *No*. Her heart stopped. 'It can't be.' The words choked out of her tight throat as her head spun. She might have stumbled, had she been on her feet, but her wings kept her steady. *It can't be.*

From the corner of her eyes, she could see Nene reach out for crystals of onyx and cloud nestled within the living vine. Nwamara let out a hiss as she slapped the bird-woman's claw away. Was she blind or had she lost all form of sense?

'Nwamara,' Nene spluttered, clutching at her wing as she blinked back fresh tears.

'Nwanne-nwanyi Nene, you nearly surrendered yourself to dust. Open your eyes and *look* at what you had been quick to grasp.'

Nene's beak parted as she looked down cautiously. Soon enough, the crease on her forehead smoothed as her eyes widened. 'Àlà and Ikuku,' she gasped.

Nwamara's chest tightened at their names. Àlà and Ikuku: lost parts of the Mother's scattered crystal. Through the crystal's glare, she could see them now, as clearly as she could see the snow. The Twins. The Daughters of Nri.

'They must evoke them,' Nwamara breathed along with the song forming in her head; it resonated with a frequency that clutched at her throat. The song of Truth. Nwamara doubled over as she clawed for the air that had been knocked out of her. She had only heard that song once in her centuries of living. Before the god's

departure. Before Eze Ochichiri started his blood-soaked reign. A shiver escaped Nwamara and the world began to tremble.

Nwamara tugged Nene's wing and pulled her up as a gush of blue liquid bled from beneath the vines. A river of sapphire formed like a serpent slithering through the land. Even from her height, hot steam pressed against her cheeks.

'A curse,' Nene breathed. 'They will bring forth a curse.'

'Or salvation,' Nwamara said gently. 'Either way, what will be, will be.'

CHAPTER 1

THE ỌNWỤ MARK

City of Nri

Olu's stomach turned as a thin line of crimson formed across his palm. Years spent in battle left him numb to the sight of blood, so why should such a small cut affect him so?

'Ozo,' the amosu said, her right hand beckoning to him, but it was the left that had held his attention. It held a bloodstained daga and a time-worn iko. As Olu peered closer, he could see that she was trembling. She was afraid.

Olu tended to have that effect on people. Perhaps it was his stature. He stood heads taller than most, his muscles had been beat strong with training, and on his face he wore a scar from a fight he seldom had the stomach to speak of. He knew he could be fearsome on the best of days. He tried and failed to relax the rigidity in his body. This was not the best of days.

He attempted to read the woman but, like most amosus, her face was veiled by a cascade of seashells. Long chains pooled against a flat disk that hung at her neck and extended out over her shoulders.

'Ozo, you need to squeeze,' she said, as she drew closer, pausing at every step as though he were seconds from leaping at her.

He couldn't deny that he wanted to. He wanted to knock her away and bolt out of the Edemede. He felt suffocated under the weight of its curved beige walls, lined

with thick woven materials, which whispered of the countless evils they had seen.

‘Ozo?’

Olu’s nose flared at her persistence but he did as she asked. What choice did he have? The girl could not die.

‘It’s hard the first time,’ General Ikenna said from beside him.

Olu bristled. Was that what Ikenna thought the problem was? The newness of the hellish practice? He sucked in his rage and let out a cool sigh before allowing his gaze to fall on Ikenna – the grandson of the lord of war relations, Obi Somto.

Though they were peers, having started their duty at the same time, Ikenna’s blood had propelled him to a height unattainable for Olu. As the next in line to succeed his uncle, Ozo Okoro, as Head General of the Eze’s army, Ikenna had power; that is why Olu had gone to him, his oldest friend, and asked for help.

He had known that Ikenna would ask for something in return; he always did. Olu just hadn’t imagined it would be something so *depraved*. He should have refused him. In truth, he should have pummelled him. But then the girl ... Olu took a deep breath and cracked his neck.

‘This is unnecessary,’ Olu said, his voice more biting than he would have liked. He fought to settle his growing rage as he watched a mocking frown on Ikenna’s thin lips.

‘Unnecessary?’ Ikenna repeated. ‘Yes, I suppose it is unnecessary to go against my grandfather’s wishes and break twins out of the Towers – twins, who, according to you, *killed* the Eze.’

Olu’s head snapped towards the amoosu woman, who immediately looked down to her feet. He felt a sting in his palm. His fingers dug into the fresh wound as he turned back to Ikenna.

‘Never. *Never*. Say. Those. Words. Again.’ Olu forced the blows his arms wanted to deliver into words. Now was not the time for action. If he acted, he would kill. If he killed, he would not be able to free the girl.

The girls, he corrected as he thought back to the one they had found with Sinai. His stomach tightened at the memory of the girl who wore Sinai’s face. The girl who had torn the earth apart almost a sun-cycle ago when she had witnessed her village being ransacked by the Eze’s men. His men.

It didn't make sense for her to be *here*. Nor did it make sense for the girls to still be alive upon their discovery in Eze Ochichiri's quarters. The Eze's law was clear on the matter of twins; they should have been killed on sight. Instead, they were apprehended, and reports of flying chairs and winds that cracked the walls clung to the guards' quivering lips. The whispers had instilled fear in Obi Somto. It was that fear that had kept the girls alive.

Now, all that stood between the girls and death was time. Time for Obi Somto to realise that the Eze was dead and the responsibility of those girls rested solely on his shoulders. Olu had no doubt that when that time came, Obi Somto would burn the city of Nri down if it meant vanquishing them.

Olu cut a glare at Ikenna. No one, outside the two of them, should have known about the Eze's death. He turned to the amoosu. Would he have to kill her now? He glanced at her neck, slender as a branch of rosewood. Snapping her head should be easy enough. Yet the thought left a sour taste in his mouth. *Damn Ikenna.*

'I gave you my word,' Olu said carefully. 'I will do whatever you ask if you could help me free those girls. An Obara oath is not necessary.'

'Your word is *nice*—' Ikenna started as he drew the daga across his palm before holding it over the iko; a chill ran down Olu's spine as he watched Ikenna's blood mix with his '—but sadly I've been betrayed enough times to know that I can't rely on anyone's word, not even a man with your reputation. Freeing those girls means severing ties. Important ties. I would be a fool to do that on your *word*,' he said, handing the iko back to the woman.

'I want —' Olu started. He was stopped by a blood-curdling scream from the amoosu's wide-open mouth. He grasped on the hilt of his abara sword as his body sprung into action but it would have no effect on the danger, which seemed to be buried within the blood-filled iko. Beneath the white shell headcover, the amoosu wore a tortured expression.

'You can't do this,' she whispered, the crow seashells clanging as she shook her head. Olu lowered his abara sword. It simmered green with its deadly enchantment as he put it back in its sleeve. The fear in her voice made the hairs on his arms stand up. 'You can't, you can't, no you can't.'

'Are you broken?' Ikenna demanded. His voice remained steady but Olu had

glimpsed fear within his slit eyes.

‘Look,’ the woman said, thrusting the iko towards Ikenna, ‘it bears the mgbanwe ... and ... and ... the ɔnwụ mark. Death. It means change, it means death, so much death. Yes, yes, the Kingdom will find a new ruler – you, Ozo Ikenna, you will rule, but-but the Kingdom ... death will come over it, as relentless as wildfire.’

‘I will be the Eze?’ Ikenna said, his voice thick with emotion.

Olu frowned. Was that all he’d gleaned from her premonition? ‘Death,’ he said firmly. ‘She sees death.’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’ Ikenna scoffed. ‘We’re changing a kingdom. For every mark of change, there is a price. Of course, there will be those that will die. Think of what happened when Eze Ochichiri took power.’

Olu looked at Ikenna as though for the first time. The hunger behind the man’s eyes made him want to turn away. ‘Ikenna.’

He jutted his chin forward. ‘Who else if not me? My dear grandfather? Gods, can you imagine that? *Eze Somto*? Or better yet Nri’s golden lord, *Eze Akunna*?’

Olu held his glare but he couldn’t ignore the pang of defeat at his chest. As lords of war and finance, Obi Somto and Obi Akunna were the most powerful Obis, the natural contenders for the empty throne. They were also soullessly cruel.

‘Olu, we have a chance here for *real* change.’

Despite himself, Olu shook his head at the thought of innocent bloodshed; nothing could be *worth* that.

Ikenna’s eyes narrowed. ‘I have no other reason for keeping those murderous *curses* alive. If you don’t go through with this, I will not help and your precious twins will burn.’

Olu’s jaw clamped at the thought of Sinai engulfed in flames. ‘The world needs them,’ he said gruffly. ‘Ikenna, friend, you must believe me.’

‘No. It is you who must believe when I say that the Kingdom needs *me*.’

Olu turned to the amoosu woman. He could feel her silent pleading. She wanted him to refuse. She was begging him to refuse. Dread sank into his stomach as he looked at her trembling hands over the blood-filled iko. He stretched his sore hand, reopening the thinly crusted wound. The scent of Sinai hung around him. A memory of a time when she was safe in his arms. The girl must live.

DESCENDANTS OF THE FIRST

‘Proceed.’

CHAPTER 2

CURSED ONES

Furuefu forest

Shimmering honey nudged Sinai awake. She groaned, shifting away from what could only be another morning in the Furuefu forest. Sleep: all she wanted was sleep. She folded her arm over her head and tried to nestle back into the darkness, but the forest was relentless. A cacophony of bird whistles and rustling thundered about her, and the breeze filtered through her coarse hair.

‘Eurgh,’ she murmured as her mind sprang into action. It had been the same every morning since their escape from the city of Nri. Faces she didn’t recognise flashed through her mind, the smell of smoke and charred flesh filled her nostrils, then ... Olu.

His emerald gaze lingered as she opened her eyes to the new day. The thought of him brought a frown to her face. Olu. A soldier in the Eze’s army. Her friend, once her protector. Now her shame.

Snap.

The air thinned as Sinai stared down from the tree she’d slept in. All she could see was the morning mist. She bit her lip. That sound was a twig, which meant Naala was leaving without her. Again.

Sinai sighed as she clambered down. Her movements were even clumsier than usual as thoughts of having to spend another day searching for Naala clanged

against her head.

‘Wai—’ Sinai started, halting her cry as she came face-to-face with Naala, the girl that she had met in the palace three moon-cycles ago. The girl that looked almost exactly like her. The girl that felt like family ... a concept that Sinai had never fully known in the cold palace that had raised her.

‘Sinai, you know I can’t wait for you to sleep in,’ Naala said.

Sinai hadn’t expected a warm reception, not since their escape from the palace, but it seemed this morning Naala was feeling particularly distant. *Sleep in?* Sinai thought, glancing back at the peach horizon. The sun had barely broken through.

‘Don’t give me that look—’ Naala sighed, pressing her fingers into her eyes ‘—we’ve been through this – I can’t afford to waste any more time. With every delay, they are getting further away.’

They. Sinai didn’t really know who *they* were, though *they* now determined every moment of her waking hours. All Sinai knew was that *they* had all survived the Eze’s village attacks and Naala owed them her life.

Moments before they’d fled the city, Olu had gasped, ‘The Amaghi,’ as vines that Naala had sprang to life had tightened across his neck. The Amaghi, the secret people who had rescued Naala’s lost companions. Only a trusted few knew of them; Olu, it seemed, was one of the few. Even so, it hadn’t been easy for Naala to ask Olu that. It was the only thing she had said to him that hadn’t been curses, or threats to kill him, or ‘murderer’. She had screamed that word at him several times, her voice laced with venom. Sinai was certain that Naala would have killed Olu had she not stood in her way ... a gesture that had torn this distance between them.

‘I am ready to go,’ Sinai insisted, ignoring the ache radiating from her blistered feet.

Naala raised her eyebrows; her lips were tense as though she were restraining a smile.

‘What?’ Sinai asked hesitantly.

‘Your hammock.’

Sinai’s cheeks flamed in the moist air. The hammock. How could she have forgotten the stupid hammock ... *again.*

‘Oh, yes. Well, I meant – I *will* be ready *soon*, as soon as I get it down. Just please

don't—' The words dried at the tip of Sinai's mouth; the hairs on the back of her neck lifted.

Something wasn't right.

A cold chill ran down her spine. A warning rang through her body. Something was following them. Something thirsting for blood. Something—

'Sinai,' Naala snapped; her eyebrows were pulled together. 'You think we're being followed again?' Her dark eyes roamed over Sinai's face intently. 'Listen to me, there is *nothing* out there.'

There had been a time when Naala had taken her claims seriously but, after one too many fruitless searches, she had started to get annoyed. Now, it seemed, she was concerned. Sinai released the breath she had been holding. She would have preferred Naala's annoyance. The pitying look in Naala's eye made her feel crazy. She wasn't crazy. There was something—

'Abomination!' a voice rang from behind her. She turned and buckled at the sight of four men standing in front of an ibu elephant with spears jutting towards the girls. She could feel the heat emitting from the green enchanted metal. *Abara metal*, she thought, as her stomach dropped.

'Cursed ones,' another man snarled. Behind them, the ibu elephant lazily drew up its trunk. Its body was caked with white mud that flaked around the dead animals, spices and baskets draped at either side of its belly.

Traders, Sinai thought. Her gaze shifted to a large basket with thick, curved red oak frames, tied securely with a dark rope. She felt power as black as night stirring within her.

There was something breathing in that basket.

Sinai squinted as a pair of small hands, several shades darker than wood, clutched at the bars before shifting out of sight. *A child?* It was not uncommon to hear of traders taking trips to the rural villages to grab peasants that they would sell into servitude in the larger cities. But whoever was in that basket couldn't have lived more than five years. Sinai's heart ached at the thought and a light breeze began to clear the morning mist.

'You don't want to do this,' Naala warned. Sparks of gold danced across her eyes but they came to a stop when one of the men jabbed at her with his enchanted

spear. A strangled cry escaped her gritted teeth. ‘Blast it!’ she roared, her eyes ablaze, as a thin crimson line began to form on her arm.

Writhing pain singed at Sinai’s untouched arm. It tasted of abara metal. It clutched at her throat and blinded her before it began to cool. A shiver ran down her spine. The pain was not hers yet she had felt it all the same.

It had first happened when they had been taken out of the Towers on Olu’s command. Sinai had expected to feel relief upon seeing him, but, instead, bloodthirst had coursed through her. Thick and relentless. Naala’s thoughts, Naala’s pains, had bored their way into her skin as though they had belonged to her. As though it had been *her* village that Olu had torn through with his abara sword on the Eze’s command. Sinai drew a breath as she pushed the memory aside. *Not now.*

‘Not a word, abumoonu,’ the man said, his eyes glued on the two girls as he hissed at his companions, ‘How much will they fetch for?’

‘Fetch for? Death is all that they can fetch! Look at them ... twins, *any ofia!*’ one man cursed. His thick hair fell in fat rolls that obscured his eyes as they jumped erratically between the two of them.

‘We need to kill them,’ another said. His still, coal eyes sent a chill running down Sinai’s back.

‘Eh-he,’ the other agreed, ‘it’s the only way we can be saved!’

The man who had struck Naala cackled. ‘Bah, that is nonsense! I’ve come across my fair share of so-called *curse*d twins and they’re just like you and me – weaker, in fact – and the city will pay a hell of a lot more for their heads.’

Sweat formed on Sinai’s brow as she threw a glance at Naala. She was studying them. Her fists opened and closed, preparing for action. Sinai’s heart clambered against her chest.

A voice boomed in her head: *What do you have to be afraid of? Was it not you who killed the Eze?* It sounded almost like Meekulu Kaurandua, the palace cook who had saved Sinai in more ways than one. The woman whose blood still stained Sinai’s palms.

Sinai steadied herself. She *had* defeated Eze Ochichiri, the godkiller himself. She and Naala had killed him with a power that Sinai had yet to make sense of. Like Naala, it felt familiar and yet remained a mystery; it stood in the background of her existence, lurking around her, dark and distant.

That would no longer suit; she needed to wield it *now*. Sinai tugged at the power. Her heart hammered and her palms moistened from the effort, yet the power felt as aloof as ever.

Something shifted.

Naala's eyes dazzled gold as the vines sprang to life, wrapping around the ankles of each of the men and pulling until they came crashing to the ground.

Sinai gaped at the entangled men.

'Don't just stand there!' Naala cried over their violent shouts. 'Run!'

Run? Run. Sinai pulled at her heavy legs but, before she could make much headway, a thought clutched at her. She plunged to the ground. Her heart pounded as spots of black mist, speckled gold, grew at her periphery.

'Get up!' Naala cried, jerking at her arm. 'Run!' Sinai felt something wet hit her palm. She looked up to find lines of blood trickling down from Naala's wound. 'Move!'

'We can't,' Sinai breathed as she looked back to the elephant. It had buckled back from fright and let out a brass trumpet sound. 'The child!'

'The child?' Naala exclaimed, the whites of her eyes growing as she followed Sinai's gaze to the basket and then back to the men who had struggled back to their feet. 'Blast it!' Her hands came to her head. 'Think, think, think.'

Naala paused, her neck curving as she looked up to the skies. Bursts of gold erupted from her eyes as more tree vines slithered down to the ground, wrapping around the ankles, torso and arms of each of the men.

'Witch! Abumoonu! Witch!' they cried before the tangled vines brought them to a muffled silence. Naala breathed heavily through clenched teeth as the vines lifted the grappling men to the top of the trees where they hung cocooned.

Sinai jolted at the wet sound of snapped vines as they fought their way out. Naala wasted no time. Thick branches tore off the trees before knocking each of their heads until they settled.

'That won't keep them long,' Naala breathed. 'Let's get the child. We have to go.'

Sinai sucked in a deep breath, shaking off the feeling that would come over her after witnessing Naala's many feats ... the feeling that she had no use at all.

The elephant's wrinkled hazel eyes followed her as she approached before

it turned to graze. Sinai let out a slow breath as she reached the basket before unlatching its rusty hook. It was a girl. Her thick hair had been pulled into two puffs, far larger than her small head.

‘Ndewo,’ Sinai said gently, her heart aching at the girl’s trembling frame. She was younger than Sinai had initially thought and Naala’s performance was sure to have frightened her. The little one shifted forward and hesitantly peered out of the basket.

‘Why is she locked up like this?’ Naala murmured as she came over.

‘She’s their capture,’ Sinai said, as Naala’s lips pulled to a frown. ‘Servants are an invaluable *commodity* in the palace, especially if they are trained from childhood. It’s not uncommon for people from the squalors to sell their own children, as a means to survive. Some were snatched from their village and sold into servitude or ... the *akwuna* house.’

Naala’s lip tightened before her eyes met the trembling girl. Her face softened. ‘Ndewo, little one.’ She crossed her palm across her chest and extended it to the girl, performing the greeting in Nri. ‘Where are you from?’

The girl crawled out to the edge of the basket and returned the gesture with a smile.

‘Twins,’ she whispered.

Sinai paused and looked at Naala. ‘Oh ...’ she murmured. Of course, the sight of the both of them must be terrifying, especially to a child. Twins, cursed beings that wore the same face.

‘Like Isiawe and Isioma?’ the girl beamed.

‘Who?’ Sinai asked.

‘Like Isiawe and Isioma?’ The girl shrugged as she let her legs swing out of the basket. ‘Well ... *are* you good like Isiawe and Isioma or bad like them?’ she said, pointing up at the men.

‘We’re not like them,’ Naala said quickly. ‘We want to help you.’

The girl paused as she inspected Naala’s face before her eyes lit up.

‘Can you take me back home now, please?’

‘Where is home?’

‘Siwunmi. You can take me there?’ the girl said as she swayed slightly on the

open basket door.

‘Siwunmi?’ Naala murmured. ‘That is quite far away.’ Shadows formed over her face as she weighed something in her head. *The Amaghi*, Sinai thought.

‘Oh, it is far?’ the girl huffed as her bottom lip trembled. ‘I should never, never have picked them.’

‘Picked what?’

The girl sniffed as she ran her hands across the bars. She gulped to settle her voice. ‘I was picking licky-licky when the bad men took me.’

‘Picking what?’ Sinai murmured.

‘She means the fruit, icheku.’ Naala smiled distantly. ‘I used to get in quite a bit of trouble picking icheku too. What’s your name?’

‘Ginika,’ the girl replied, and Naala’s face fell.

Sinai opened her mouth to ask Naala what was wrong but the other girl’s face hardened. She knew that look; she could ask all she wanted but Naala wasn’t going to say a word on the subject.

‘Gini?’ Naala said eventually. Her voice was thick but her eyes dry as she blinked back at the girl. ‘Let’s get you home.’

*

Sinai felt like a mule. Her back ached, her feet were wet with blood and her lungs were beaten raw.

‘Hurry up, Sinai,’ Naala hollered. Worse than that, she was an ineffectual mule. Even with Gini’s tiny hand in hers, Naala still marched poles ahead. *What do they give to people in these villages?* This couldn’t be natural.

Though Naala and her were similar in size, there was a power to Naala’s body that she lacked. Where Sinai was soft and supple, Naala was lean and strong; her body ran with slight lines and curves of muscles that Sinai had never seen on her own body. Gini, however, was but a child; how could her legs keep up where Sinai’s failed?

‘I know,’ Sinai mumbled, pondering, not for the first time, why she was even there. She had initially told herself that it was the guilt. When she had stood between Naala and Olu, she had seen something break in the girl’s eyes. Something Sinai desperately wanted to get back. She wanted to help Naala find her friends but soon

into the journey Sinai had started to feel like a burden. She was far slower than Naala and had no idea how to navigate the forest. Naala was constantly teaching her and, despite her explanations, Sinai somehow managed to get things a little bit wrong. Soon she had to admit to herself that she wasn't here to support; she was here because she had nowhere else to go.

'My legs hurt,' Gini sighed. *Oh, thank heavens*, Sinai thought as Naala stopped to look down at the girl.

'We're almost there, but do you want to have a break? Perhaps eat some food?' Naala asked as she shifted the boar that they had taken from the bandits' possessions off from her shoulders, and placed it on the plush ground. The girl nodded, jumping up and down in excitement.

'Food it is,' she chuckled.

'Food it is,' Sinai repeated as she watched Naala pull out a flint daga and scraps of uchie tree bark from her satchel.

'Do you want me to help skin the meat?' the little girl asked as she circled Naala's legs.

'*You* know how?' Sinai exclaimed. Naala inspected Gini with one eyebrow raised. The girl nodded and Sinai felt her stomach twist. Sinai's culinary training consisted solely of watching her food be served, a fact that filled her with shame every time she watched Naala prepare their food.

'Then sure.' Naala shrugged, pulling out another daga and handing it over to the girl. Naala's head shook slightly as a wide grin formed on her lips. Sinai watched both of them kneeling down and working away at the boar; she bit at her bottom lip as she tried to find something to do with her hands.

'I'll grab some water,' she announced after a few lost minutes had gone by.

Naala nodded. 'That's a good idea—' she looked up '—there should be a river not too far from here. Just head towards the north west. Be sure to pick the mmiri pods; don't try to drink the river—'

'Water. Yes, I remember,' Sinai said. She had remembered. Contrary to Naala's beliefs, she did know things. Just not as much as she needed to.

Naala studied her carefully. 'Do you need me to show you the way?'

'No,' Sinai replied quickly as she shifted from Naala's piercing gaze. 'I know,

head north.'

'North west.' Naala sighed, getting up to her feet. Sinai's cheeks burned.

'Yes, that's what I meant,' she insisted, gesturing for Naala to sit back down. 'You were the one that said we didn't have time. You carry on with the food. I'll get the water.' Sinai headed into the forest before Naala could utter another word.

*

She was lost. Heavens, help her, she was *lost*. How could she have—

'Water,' Sinai murmured, as she caught flashes of blue between the tree bark. 'Water!' she exclaimed, before pushing herself forward until she found herself on the bank. A wide lake dazzled before her, shimmering in shades of cyan. Blue-green ripples glistened in the afternoon sun. Clusters of mmiri pods sprouted alongside ninebark shrubs and witch hazel but it was the river itself that stole her attention.

Sinai could picture herself swimming in the liquid dream.

'No,' she muttered to herself as she tried to shake away the taste of the cool water against her skin. She was so sore, so filthy, but she had to ... she had to what? Watch Naala and Gini cook? The thought of standing in their camp, watching them at work whilst she twiddled her thumbs, pricked against her skin.

Sinai tugged at the vines that held her shoes together. Surely she could have a little dip in the water? She loosened her torn skirt until all she was left in was the wrappers that she tied around her waist and chest. Even if she spent twenty minutes dipping, she'd be back before they'd finished. She'd be more refreshed; perhaps she'd even walk faster after soothing her feet.

She double knotted her garments hastily before drawing her feet towards the water and letting it kiss her toe.

A cool fresh sensation ran through her and Sinai grinned with delight. Her worries and stresses all seemed to melt away as she moved deeper into the river. She watched as a bale of large turtles drifted curiously towards her, their eyes drooped and lazy as their paddled arms swept through the water. Sinai didn't want to frighten them. She waded slowly through the river, clenching her stomach as the cool water crept up her body, glossing her dark skin. She smiled as the large turtles began to circle around her; their glazed, hardened shells sparkled in the sun like quartz. Sinai sank her body deep into the water before lifting her feet up and

turning on her back. The cool water held her head steady as her face bathed in the glory of the sun. She hadn't felt so relaxed in moon-cycles. She allowed her mind to wander to thoughts of beautiful skies and a belly full of warm rich food.

Feed.

The word sprang into her mind and she gasped audibly as she plummeted into the water before bursting back up. She spluttered as stray droplets found their way to the back of her throat. When she finally managed to open her eyes, she saw the last of the turtles scuttling away deep into the river, blending smoothly with the darkness that lay beneath. Sinai's heartbeat pounded against her temple as she looked around.

That thought hadn't been her own. Yet it had left her feeling drained and disorientated, with a burning desire to feel blood and broken bones crunching in her mouth. Her stomach heaved at the thought.

She paused as she watched the flurry of trees that sloped over the river. She squinted as she saw something, a slither of silver light rippling beneath the leaves. Her stomach dipped. That was it. She knew it as clearly as she knew her own name. It hadn't been in her head; *that was it*. The thing that had been following them; not the traders, not the wind but this ... this *beast*.

Naala and Gini.

Sinai flinched at the thought of them. She had to get to them. She needed to warn them. She pushed herself forward, and her heart came to a painful stop as she realised that something was holding her steady in place.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST DAUGHTER OF OYO

City of Nri

‘Are you sure it’s safe?’ Ebum said quietly, as they approached the crystallised gates of the Oroma room.

Ina regarded her coolly, resisting the urge to strike the cowering girl. *It’s not her fault*, she told herself. *She’s right to be afraid*. Her friend – *their* friend – Lebechi had died just a few days prior.

Lebechi’s death had been so sudden, so unexpected. Worse still was her family; their eyes had darkened with sorrow and *something* else, something too terrible to be said. Ebum was right to be afraid; however, there was no excuse for being complacent.

‘Just wait here for me,’ Ina muttered before throwing a look at the girl. ‘But,’ she began, her voice low and serious, ‘if you hear *anything* untoward, scream for help then fetch me.’

Ebum gave a slow nod but she didn’t meet her eyes. Ina’s lips curled as she watched Ebum clutch at her forearm absentmindedly. She didn’t trust Ebum – she was weak – but who else did she have?

Ina took a deep breath as she entered the Oroma quarters. She felt for the rim

of the small daga she had hidden in the folds of her garments. Noblewomen were not permitted to bear weapons, especially not ones wielded from the enchanted abara metal. She had paid heavily for an enchanted daga in the black market, and she would pay double if she was caught with it. But that meant little to her. Ina had promised herself a while ago that she would die before being placed under anyone else's control. Not since Chief O— Chief Oj—

Ina shook his name out of her head vigorously and squeezed her eyes shut. Every time she thought of him, her body rang with a sense of powerlessness, a loss of control that tore at her skin. She breathed out as she pictured Asilia, the Eze's ferocious lion, tearing the slime of a man to shreds on Sinai's command. Slowly, she felt her sense of self returning back to her, and she was able to breathe. She opened her eyes.

'Blast it,' Ina cursed. The mirrored plates that walled the room spat out pale beams of light from the օkųs hanging at its corners, leaving no doubt that the room was empty. She shouldn't curse. It was beneath her. A foul and common practice and yet ... 'Blast it,' she sighed. He was late.

Ina stormed past the grand columns, adorned with clear sparkling quartz, slowing as she reached the sundial in the end of the room. The minuscule circular օkų light threw a shadow over the flat end of the golden cone. Ina's lips stiffened further as she read the time. He should have been here minutes ago. She loathed waiting.

'Ndewo, Lolo Ina,' a deep voice said behind her, and Ina had to stop herself from screaming. A haze of fear brushed over her skin and she reached for her daga, jabbing it towards the owner of the voice.

'Ina,' Olu said with his hands up. His emerald eyes fixed on the small weapon. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.'

Ina stared back at him. Her breathing was sharp and her heart pounding. She let the sickly feeling of fear wash over her but she didn't move. Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes.

'Ina,' Olu repeated softly.

She blinked and let her hands fall back to her side, squeezing them in an attempt to stop the shaking. She hated her fear. She hated remembering its cause. Most of

all, she hated the blasted pity bleeding into Olu's eyes.

'Are you okay?' Olu asked as she returned the daga into the pouch in her garment.

'You shouldn't have scared me,' she said briskly, 'hiding behind pillars like some sort of snake. It is not a fetching trait.'

'I'll try to keep that in mind,' he said softly. He fought away the smile tugging at his lips.

Ina responded to his efforts with a scowl. She noticed dark circles hung around his eyes and a dullness sitting beneath his dark-bronzed skin. Her scowl faltered. *When was the last time he slept?* she wondered.

'What's going on, Olu?' Ina said. That question had been on her mind every day since Sinai had left for the Eze's quarters near on three moon-cycles ago. She had never returned and something had *changed* in the palace. Ina knew the change was connected to Lebechi's death, the Eze's disappearance, even Sinai; she just didn't know how. She *needed* to know how. It was the only way to ensure that she could survive it.

Olu's rigid stance suddenly relaxed into a deep sigh. 'The Eze is dead.'

Ina took a step back as though someone had pushed her. She blinked, trying desperately to keep her face composed.

'Impossible,' she breathed, watching him intently for signs of lies or madness.

'He's gone and everything has ... changed.'

Ina recalled the increased military effort, the hidden meetings and the recent demureness of Lolo Akuada, the wife of the head of war.

'Obi Somto is preparing to take over?'

Olu's eyes widened before he lowered them. His jaw clenched as he straightened his posture.

'Obi Somto is dead, as is Head General Okoro.'

Ina let out a short sound that would have resembled a laugh if it hadn't been so sad. None of this was funny, yet something about the ridiculousness of it all filled her with frivolous energy.

'So they're all clambering for the Eze's seat,' she whispered. 'This will bring a war to Nri.' She squeezed the rim of her daga.

'It won't get to war. Once General Ikenna has secured a strong position within

the Obis then—’

‘General Ikenna? That brute? *He* wants to take the position too? He wants to be *Eze*?’

‘He’s not a brute,’ Olu said quietly, almost to himself. ‘Yes, he may need moulding but that will come with age. He’s still a young man. He cares for this Kingdom and wants it to be great. It’s time for new blood.’

‘Caring is the minimal requirement for a leader,’ Ina retorted. ‘It is certainly not the determining factor.’ She shook her head. ‘Ikenna is too brash, too desperate for power, any fool can see that he would do ...’ She looked up at Olu. ‘It was him. He killed Obi Somto and the Head General.’

Olu tensed.

‘His own *grandfather*? His uncle?’ Ina said, bringing her hand up to her mouth. Nausea settled in the pit of her stomach. She was struck with the sudden urge to run, to flee before she too was dragged down by the madness infecting the Kingdom of Nri.

Olu’s green eyes glazed over coldly. ‘It was necessary,’ he said flatly. ‘With the Eze gone, Obi Somto and his military prowess ... he would have overwhelmed us, taken over the city. Somto and Head General Okoro championed the Eze’s cruelty; they enjoyed it. Do you know what type of man you have to be, to be the hand of the Eze, the overseer of all his cruel deeds and *enjoy* it? He had to act.’

Ina narrowed her gaze. ‘Do you truly believe that, Olu?’

His eyes fluttered as a wave of exhaustion washed over him.

‘I have to,’ he said.

Ina frowned. His skin was so dull, his eyes tired and she could see little veins pulsing around his forehead. An image of Nkoli came to mind; a silly woman who had taken an Obara oath years ago to get out of her deepening debts. She had looked like this.

‘Surely not,’ she murmured. A lump formed at her throat. The Obara oath was a curse, a disease that crippled all that took it. Olu was a man, an infuriating one at that, but she liked him. He did not deserve to have his life tied to an oath in such a way.

‘What have you done?’ she whispered, her eyes pricking before she blinked away

furiously.

He gave her a hard look before looking back at the ground. 'I had to get her out of here,' he said quietly.

'Who?' she spat as heat steamed from her head. How could he be so *stupid*? Nothing, no one, could justify this.

'And Ikenna is not a bad man – it was not ... it's not as bad as it may seem.'

'Get *who* out of here?' Ina said through gritted teeth.

He looked back at her pleadingly and suddenly it clicked.

'Sinai?' she breathed. Sinai had gone to see the Eze, and now he was dead. 'Was she involved?'

'I don't know the details, but all I know is that she would have died had she stayed. The only way to get her out was through Ikenna and the only way Ikenna would let her out was if I swore my allegiance to him.'

As his words rushed over her, licks of anger scorched against her skin.

'Fool,' Ina spat, her face warm with fury.

'Ina.'

'No—' she shook her head '—there could have been another way. Why did you not consult *me*?' she raged, catching herself before her itching palm made contact with his face. 'You've thrown away your life!'

'She needed to leave.'

Ina sighed in frustration. She saw the hope brimming in his eyes and she knew that there was no saving him. He didn't even know what he had done, and by the time he did, it would be too late. Ina felt a thick lump forming in her throat and she threw her head back, sniffing back her tears before turning back to her old friend. 'And so do I,' she said quietly. 'I'm going back home – back to Oyo, immediately. I will not stay here while you people tear this land apart. If the Eze is dead then I have no tie to this kingdom.'

Olu looked back at her. 'Ina.'

'No, I will *not* give this city my life,' she said forcefully. The memory came quicker than she could stop it. Chief Ojo's wine-soaked breath against her skin. His weight squeezing out the breath in her lungs. Ina shook her head furiously. 'It's already taken too much.'

‘They won’t let you go,’ Olu said, and Ina held on to a crystal column to steady herself. ‘Whether the Eze is dead or alive, you are still the daughter of the king that rules Oyo. Whoever seeks power will need to keep Oyo on their side, which means...’

‘They’ll need to keep me,’ Ina murmured, her voice breaking as she shut her eyes and clenched her trembling hands.

‘Oyo was once my home too,’ Olu said, ‘I consider you kin. I will protect you.’

Ina’s eyes flew open and looked back at him sternly. ‘How? You can’t even protect yourself,’ she snapped. Her heart twisted. She had caught the hurt on Olu’s face before he had the chance to mask it. Ina opened her mouth to say something but the words wouldn’t come out. What else was there to say? Ina shook her head and walked out of the room.

She opened the door to find Ebum lounging idly in the corridor. Fury slammed into her body. She wanted to shake her and scream; even with Lebechi gone, the girl didn’t understand. She still had no idea what was coming for them. In truth, neither did Ina, but she knew that she didn’t want to find out.

Ina clapped her hands at her before thundering down the hall, only pausing when something caught her eye. She drew closer to the open window and watched a huddle of nnunu women gathered on the grounds below. She had never seen them gathered like that before. They usually sang in solitude through the city of Nri, begging to gather enough gold shells to gain favour to fly again. Her stomach dipped in fright. *Were they whispering?* She frowned. Nnunu women couldn’t *talk?*

Ina squinted as she saw some of their feet hovering over the ground.

‘Are they ... fl—’ Ebum started before she caught Ina’s glare.

‘Let’s go,’ Ina said calmly, though her heart slammed against her chest. Ebum had seen it too. She couldn’t have imagined it. *They could fly.* She looked across the palace she had called home since she was three years old. It had never felt more like a prison. She needed to get out of here, and somehow the nnunu women were her way out.

CHAPTER 4

SHADES OF CYAN

Furuefu forest

It clutched at her throat. A fiery thirst that held her firmly in place. Sinai's arms slapped against the cold river. She needed to leave. It was coming. She needed to warn—

Be still.

Sinai's body slackened with relief as the dryness clutching at her throat loosened. A woman drew towards her and Sinai was struck breathless. She had heard tales of ancient creatures, embodiments of a person's soul, a person's chi. They were said to be the purest of creatures, a guiding light. Is this what the woman was? A saviour from the beast that lurked deep in the forest? She must be. The fear Sinai had felt had slipped away and only joy was left.

As she pulled closer, she could see the woman's head was submerged in the water up until the bridge of her nose. Her pitch-black eyes flashed with bursts of blue and green, as though she had captured the river itself within them. She lifted her head slightly; revealing a string of pearls that ran across her face just above the tip of her nose. They seemed to be embedded in her deep brown skin. Her thick hair hung to the sides of her face.

The woman drifted backwards and the thirst returned, worse than before, slicing through her throat with inexorable force. Sinai sprang forward but, each time she

did, the woman drew further and further back, pulling Sinai deeper into the lake. The woman began to sink low into the waters, and Sinai joined her, letting the water swallow her whole.

The lake darkened into a deep black, save for the woman's pearls. They glowed so bright that the light seemed to coat her entire frame. All Sinai could see, all there was, was her. The woman paused and swivelled to face Sinai with a black blanket of hair encircling her. A smile formed on her full lips, tinged dark red, the colour of dried blood. White circles of light danced around her arms, her bare chest and torso, which extended into a long tail. As Sinai watched her, a memory began to bloom in her clouded mind. She had seen this woman before, or a statue of her, a lifetime ago. *Mami Wata*, the thought sprang in her mind.

The Mami Wata's eyes bulged before she shot towards Sinai, her flashing eyes rummaging over Sinai's face.

You can speak? a rich voice sprayed in Sinai's mind.

Yes, I can. Sinai thought back, a little confused, as the Mami Wata peered at her. Ice ran down Sinai's back when the Mami Wata's long fingers wrapped around her chin.

Interesting. The Mami Wata pulled back as she swivelled her arms around.

Sinai pushed against the rippling water as a large bubble formed. The Mami Wata placed her blood-red lips on the thin ball and it drifted towards Sinai. She pulled away as it approached her mouth but it planted itself just over her nose and below her chin. Sinai took a deep breath and her lungs filled with air. Strange; she hadn't known that she had been holding her breath for all that time. She looked up at the Mami Wata.

Thank you, she thought, as the Mami Wata encircled her, her long tail wrapping around Sinai's flailing legs. Sinai numbed at the cooling touch.

You look human, the Mami Wata voiced. *I've not known a human to speak to my kind like so.* The Mami Wata sniffed at her. *Your kind speaks not with words but with emotions,* she noted as she took Sinai's head in her hand, tilting her head as her eyes flashed. *No. Not human. A mmo, perhaps?*

Not human? Sinai murmured, shaking her head free as a chill crept up her neck. The memory of the Eze crumbling before her eyes slammed into her mind. Of

course she knew she wasn't *normal*. It wasn't normal that she could hold the Mother's Crystal without turning to dust. It wasn't normal that she had used it to kill the Eze. She knew this and yet the idea of not being human disturbed her.

What was that? The Mami Wata's voice pierced through Sinai, her chilling fingers clutching at her chin. *Show that again.*

Sinai grimaced as the memory of her last encounter with Eze ran through her mind.

Impossible. The Mami Wata's grasp tightened, her eyes flashing blue. Finally she released Sinai from her grip, but her flashing eyes were widened as they fixed on her. *You are a Descendant of the First? It is impossible.*

Sinai's muscles tensed as the Mami Wata bore into her. She shuddered as a cold, slippery tail drew the hair away from her face.

Yet, here you are. Possible. Her eyes flashed as her tail traced Sinai's face. *There is another that wears your face. Another that holds your blood.* Her flashing eyes had grown wild.

An odd sound tore through Sinai's mind. It sounded like pipes and chimes contorting deep within the Mami Wata's throat. *Amuru ha abuo. The Children Born of Both.*

Though she said it at nothing more than a whisper, the phrase rang through Sinai's head; it seemed to vibrate through the river itself. Sinai flinched at its echo.

Show me more, the Mami Wata roared and Sinai felt a burning sensation against her temples as memories stormed through her head. The Eze's outstretched arm as he crumpled into dust, the crystal in Naala and Sinai's hands, its blood-red glow before the crystal settled back to green.

Chinèkè! Sinai winced as the Mami Wata's booming voice crashed into the sides of her head. *So, the Children Born of Both have evoked the Chi Crystal? This is why I have re-awoken?*

The what? Sinai thought as a shiver ran down her spine.

The Chi Crystal. You have evoked the Chi Crystal. The Mami Wata frowned as she regarded Sinai's face. *You don't know?* Her eyes darkened and a bitter smile swept over her blood-red lips. *Do you know of this, at least?: 'The chicken says that it is those who are knowledgeable who go to war with clubs?'*

Sinai was too afraid to shake her head. The Mami Wata's nose flared. *The fates have given me a true dilemma.*

Sinai swallowed. *A dilemma?*

If I help you to do something you don't understand, we will all end up in ruin. So says the proverb.

Help me with what?

The Mami Wata raised one hand to her temples and rubbed. *What do you know of the Njem?*

Sinai looked at her blankly.

The Mami Wata's eyes narrowed and she bared her teeth. *You evoked the Chi Crystal and you know nothing of Njem?*

I didn't evok—

Silence— Sinai's throat tightened so hard she flew her hand towards it *—and listen.* An image of the Mother's Crystal filled Sinai's mind. It sat nestled within Naala and Sinai's hands, shifting from green to red to green again. *When you evoked the crystal, you marked the first stage of the Njem. The gods and beasts alike have been awakened and so the transformation begins. Now you must finish what you started.*

The Mami Wata's words sat on her mind, heavy and garbled. *I don't... know what you mean. I don't know how...*

This is true. A painful truth. The Mami Wata pulled closer to her, her eyes now as black as coal. *The kingdom will burn for it, if you let it.*

The kingdom will burn? Nausea crept up Sinai's throat. Sinai had never felt so small in her life. So lost.

Yes. This kingdom will burn if I leave you ignorant as you are now. The kingdom will also burn if I tell you too much and force you on a path that you don't understand.

Sinai shook her head in protest.

It is done, the Mami Wata voiced. *In starting Njem, you have entered us into a state of chaos, a state that only the Earth Mother can still.* The Mami Wata's eyes flashed green.

The Earth Mother is dead, Sinai thought, as her throat tightened.

Yes, but you, Amuru ha abuo, are not. You have evoked the first crystal so you must evoke the second and in so doing open a portal to a great evil.

No.

You no longer have a choice in that matter; your choice lies solely with the third crystal. What you choose will either destroy the Kingdom or save it.

The Mami Wata's words tore at Sinai's flesh. *What choice?*

Why, there are many. Many choices and many truths. Right now, the truth you seek will lead to peril. You seek the truth that is the least painful. I can taste it, a common sickness in your kind. The Mami Wata examined Sinai's face. *Only one truth marks the difference between defeat and victory, the one hidden beneath the illusion. The painful truth.*

The Mami Wata's words weaved in and out of Sinai's mind. Tangled and unclear. *I ... I'm sorry. I don't understand.*

I know, but you need to, and fast. Otherwise ...

Sinai clutched at her head as heat tore through her brain, leaving her with the taste of blood in her mouth and the scent of smoke lodged in her throat.

You need to tell me more. Sinai jerked forward feverishly.

So you can have us all destroyed? The Mami Wata's voice was so low, so cutting; Sinai grimaced. *I should kill you now; what difference would it make? It is clear that you cannot do what you must do to prevent our demise.*

If you could just tel—

Silence! There are things that one does not learn simply by being told. The Mami Wata frowned. *You must learn for yourself; that is the only way.* Her eyes flashed blue as a chilling sensation ran down Sinai's spine. *Shatter the illusion and seek the truth. It is the only way that we all have a chance,* the Mami Wata murmured as she drew her tail towards the crystallized air bubble. Sinai flinched as it burst.

When she opened her eyes, the Mami Wata was gone. Sinai's limbs stretched out aimlessly in the water. She couldn't breathe. She looked up. Her stomach plunged when she saw how far the surface was. *Na,* she mouthed, as she hurled her body through the thick water. Sinai's chest burned for air as she propelled her body upwards. No matter how hard she pushed, she was no closer to the surface. Her arms were too heavy. The world's edges began to darken. Sinai tried to call upon her power but, like the river's surface, it felt impossibly far.

Sinai started to drift downwards, the weight of the world pulling her back towards its core. The darkness at the edges of her eyes spread until all she could see was the black.

Something hard tugged at her hand.

She was floating upwards.

Pressure slammed against her chest.

Sinai suddenly felt the urge to cough. When she did, she retched out bouts of river water as her eyes blurred in the sun. She blinked and coughed, spluttering on the muddy riverbank before collapsing under the weight of her body.

Naala's face hovered above her, her eyes black with murderous rage.

'What the hell are you playing at?'