

Chapter 1

You are powerful and important, and I am only me.

But I am told you are a good listener, and if I do not look into your eyes, I am a little less afraid. So I will try to tell my story without lies.

When a god stalked me on my seventeenth birthday, the day I aged out of the orphan house, I did not see him. Not at first.

No one does, as immortals prefer to send signs ahead of themselves: a flock of herons making rude symbols in the sky, for example, or a pair of oxen that eerily resemble your town butcher and his wife.

In my case, it was a perfectly ordinary gecko: bright green, flecked with orange and ochre. It skittered across the outer courtyard wall of the Aanu Meji orphan house, making dust patterns on the whitewashed brick as Mama Poorchild and my foster siblings bid me farewell.

“I was kind to you,” Mama Poorchild cooed in her singsong way, unaware of the agitated gecko inches above her head.

Mama Poorchild was my Mercy Auntie: the Realmhood worker assigned to me when I arrived in Oluwan City one year ago, an orphan still reeking of the countryside sweatmills. As I

leaned on my cane, she straightened the pack on my shoulder and smoothed my threadbare red wrapper: all I owned in the world. “I was kind,” she said. “Wasn’t I, Small Sade?”

It was not truly a question, and so I gave her the answer she wanted: words I had repeated every day for the past year, meaning it a little less every time.

“Of course, ma!”

“And I did my best?”

I swallowed, watching the gecko on the wall to avoid Mama Poorchild’s eyes. I sucked on the prayer pebble I kept beneath my tongue, hoping the Goddess of Earth would sweeten my ungrateful spirit. “I could not have asked for better,” I said. “If they knew of your kindness, how you cared for this poor Small Sade, the Anointed Ones would kiss your feet. Even if I sleep on the streets tonight, I will remember your goodness and thank Am the Storyteller.”

She beamed, especially when I said *poor*. Mama Poorchild was very proud of her name. Commoners in Oluwan take on the name of their firstborn child. Mercy Aunties, who are mothers to the Realmhood’s orphans, adopt names like *Mama Poorchild* or *Auntie Lostangel*—or the worst I’d heard, *Sister Sadwaif*.

There was a Mamasade, once. And a Babasade, assuming I was his firstborn.

But if you do not mind, I will not speak of them just now. You seem a happy person, and that is not a happy story. I would not dim the light in your eyes.

“You won’t really sleep on the streets tonight, will you?” asked Beauty Bisi, a girl from my high-rise floor and a permanent resident of the orphan home. She matched my height but was

in her mind about six or seven. She had earned the nickname both for her winsome dimples and for her religious devotion to making plain things lovelier. This morning, her deft fingers had pressed my hair into shining cornrows that ended at the nape of my neck. She had tipped the ends with beads she made herself—pebbles dyed red from the iron-rich dirt of Aanu Meji Street and bored carefully with a needle. Now she scowled at me from behind Mama Poorchild's shoulder, as though my imminent departure had turned me, her roommate, into a stranger. "Promise, Small Sade. Say you won't sleep on the street and get sold to a body bazaar."

"Of course she won't," Mama Poorchild laughed, though she avoided my gaze.

She placed twenty-six zathulus in my palm, just enough rickshaw fare for me to reach one of the vast city's major markets. She also gave me the token I had asked for: a short reed broom to represent my trade as a house girl.

"I still think you should carry a scroll," she tutted. "After a few years' indenture, you could be a scribe's assistant at the Academy of the Realm. It's a lucky orphan who knows her letters."

I did not, as she put it, know my letters. I *had* worked at a sweatmill that produced those torture objects called books. Copier children did not need to know how to read. We only needed to work: stirring foul-foul vats of ink that singed our eyebrows and binding reams of paper with edges so sharp, they drew blood. Books were for people with soft minds and full bellies. I had been hungry since birth, and so I stuffed the reed broom snugly into my pack.

Edict brats—or Wards of the Raybearers, as the more sentimental liked to call us—suffered quickly if they weren't adopted, or in my case, hired when coming of age. Women and men with greasy smiles skulked outside orphan high-rises, quick to loan us newly homeless wards a bed and a bowl of stew . . . for a price, of course. The interest was never paid in coins.

If I was lucky, a merchant or housekeeper would not mind hiring an orphan with one strong foot and one weak one. If I was even luckier, they would reserve a back stoop for me to sleep on, providing a tarp in wet season if they were generous. But if fortune did not favor me, well . . .

By sundown today, I would have nothing.

On the doorframe, I could have sworn that the gecko winked. Only then did I recognize the symbol it was etching in the dust: the round, bumpy shape of a seed pod. The mark of a Clay spirit.

“Oh no,” I blurted. “Not again.”

I was not surprised to be stalked by a deity. Perhaps for important people like yourself, encounters with the divine are special. High gods, like Am the Storyteller and the Goddess of Earth, tend to visit high mortals—creatures as rare and perfect as themselves.

But low beings always outnumber the high, even among deities. Imps and wisps, demigods and bickering sprites . . . these are workers of everyday miracles, who cause fruit to sprout from seeds, and teach bees how to swarm, and guide unborn babies to form fingers and toes. These gods do not seek perfection. They seek entertainment.

These gods, you see, are bored.

In cookfire tales, deities are drawn to unusual beauty. But in true life, they are lured by unusual . . . well, *anything*. And that is where my story comes in. We Small Sades, with our speckled skin and dead parents and misshapen feet, have been fending off spirits since the day we were born.

Do not say them, please. Those words. I see them now, eager to be spat out, hopping across your tongue like cayenne pepper.

You should not say such things about your skin. You are looking so nice, Small Sade. Really, I did not even notice.

But you did notice, and that is fine. I like my face, and it has always been this way: light spots on dark, like clouds drifting over a moonless pond. I am this way all over, in fact. The high-rise physician called it *vitiligo*. It is blander than the phrase I hear most often: *spirit-touched*.

“What do you mean, ‘Oh no?’” asked Mama Poorchild. “Not what again?”

I only shook my head, knowing she would not believe me. Most city people worshiped in the ways of Well or Ember, dismissing Clay gods as countryside superstition.

Besides, if I ignored the gecko messenger, perhaps the deity who sent it would get bored with me.

I will entertain you another time, I thought at the gecko, grinding the prayer pebble against my cheek. *Right now, if you please, I would like to focus on not being homeless.*

I waved up at the small unsmiling faces that dotted the high-rise windows and kissed Beauty Bisi goodbye. When I leaned in, she caught my face in her hands and whispered, “Beware the Crocodile God.”

Mama Poorchild shuddered . . . for this, of course, was a deity that all city folks believed in.

“The Crocodile God only eats pretty girls,” I reminded Beauty Bisi with a wink. “So I’ll be just fine.”

Beauty Bisi only frowned, fingering the beads she had strung in my hair.