

PROLOGUE

FOUR HUNDRED SEASONS AGO

First came a terrible sound. The shriek of thunder, of fury, that rocked the world. Then came red lightning; night turned to day as a thousand bolts fractured the heavens and rained down on Aye. In the grand city of Ile-Ife, which is the first city, they cleaved the Tower, crushing thousands to death. And where they touched ground across the vast continent, the villages and cities and abodes of men went up in great flames.

Yet more lightning forked into the Endless Sea, traveling down, down, past schools of fish and herds of nameless beasts, past old swollen bones and ruins of long sunk ships. It went into the fathomless deep, until it touched the very roots of the world, which took its energy, which was the pure and righteous fury of terrible Shango.

The world broke.

The sea erupted and the continent succumbed to it. The sea churned and boiled and opened channels that became gullies that broke the continent into islands. And that which was in the sea was exposed to air.

At the bottommost part of the sea where old things lay was a rock the size of three elephants. Shaken from where it had lodged, it rolled and tumbled, buoyed by restless

TOBI OGUNDIRAN

waves, by a sea come alive. Up and up it was raised, over the mountains that lurked in the deep, until it broke the surface and beached ashore beneath the barren limbs of an elder tree.

And there it glowed, beautiful, terrible; as white as the sun.

A crack appeared in the centre of the boulder. A hair's breadth, such that only a keen eye might see it. Soon it widened, running in a seam down the length of the boulder. Bits of glowing rock broke off to hiss and smoke against the black beach. A hand emerged. It wiggled, a serpent's tongue tasting air, then gripped the edge of the rock. Out came another hand that began to push, widening the crack until like a fruit, like a pod, with an almighty crack, the rock broke cleanly in two.

Out squirmed a figure. He was a hideous thing, neither man nor beast; he was gaunt, with ribs that strained against a paper-thin skin as he crawled from his prison. Farther and farther he dragged himself, his body cutting a track in the black beach. He raised his face to the sky. Where both eyes should be were ruined orifices, puckered and unseeing; where his mouth should be was a ruinous gash, sewn shut with copper threads.

This was his first face.

At the back of his head was a second face, whose eyes were black voids save for the fiery irises that burned like rings of fire in a starless night; whose lips were full of guile and cunning.

AT THE FOUNT OF CREATION

The orisha crawled through the black sand away from his rocky prison, away from the tree and down the meadow. He reached the dirt road and collapsed.

And here he remained for a few moments that might have been an eternity.