

Tanganyika Region, 1414

Part One

Chapter One

Duni walked ahead of Nyandoro as if she held the most delicate treasure between her thighs. Duni had a graceful and swaying walk that was almost like dancing, hips moving beneath the *kanga* cloth tied low on her waist while her yellow and green waist beads gleamed against her skin. That skin glowed with sweat from her walk in the hot sun. The dimpled small of her back caught and held Ny's eyes as she imagined, not for the first time, fitting her hands there as she kissed the hollow of Duni's throat.

With her four brothers, Nyandoro trailed behind Duni and the clutch of women winding their way through the center of the village on their way to the river. Her eyes were only focused on Duni. The early morning sunshine seemed to gather around Duni who walked in the midst of her sister wives, graceful and glowing with the thatched basket of clothes balanced on her head. She was the tallest of the wives and, in Ny's opinion, the most beautiful with her smooth dark skin, high cheekbones, and perpetually sleepy eyes. Like she'd already seen all there was in the world and found it all boring. She wasn't bored now, though. Leaning close to one of her sister wives, Duni laughed, her fingers fluttering up to cover the flash of white teeth. Ny felt the rippling of that joyous laughter down to her very toes.

Nyandoro couldn't look away from her.

"You watch her any harder and she's going to end up with a baby in her." One of her brothers, Kizo, said with a low laugh. His thick hair, long and luxurious as a girl's, lay heavily down his back.

"You do know that's not how it happens, right?" Nyandoro shoved Kizo.

"What do you know about where babies come from?" Adli, one of the twins, asked, laughing at her too. "You still have the smell of Iya's milk on your breath." Like all the boys, he was tall and handsome, a copy of their father. He wore his hair the shortest of them all, telling anyone who cared to listen that it made the dimple in his chin, and the rest of his good looks, stand out more.

"Shut up!" Ny muttered.

She fell back with a pout, her brothers' teasing make her blush and stumble on the smooth path. Ny was used to their teasing. She was small, like no one else in the family, her hips and breasts rounded and full in a way that often attracted stares from men and women alike, and drove her to tackle the hardest physical task, try for the most difficult kill during a hunt so no one could take her womanly shape and round, doll-like face for weakness. Her brothers remained merciless though.

Up ahead, Duni stopped laughing and nodded at something one of her sister-wives said, a smile curving her lips. Then she looked over her shoulder. Ny stumbled again. This time she fell into Duni's eyes that lingered on her, warm and thoughtful, for longer than a dozen heartbeats. Then Duni turned back around, not missing a single step. Ny's heart thumped like a frightened rabbit in her chest and she tried to control her breathing. If not for moments like those, she told herself, her infatuation would have died long ago. But it had been two long seasons and she still felt foolish and breathless every time she saw Duni. Her want felt like the full grown ache of a woman, not the uncertain desires of a child who had not yet seen her twentieth season.

In Jaguar Village where she and her family lived, the people were notoriously long-lived. One hundred and ten seasons was the average age of an elder. Because of that, the maturity of the young people officially came at twenty, much later than the fifteen and eighteen seasons Ny had heard of other villages not far from their seat at the edge of the forest. A few boys were impatient with that, eager to start their new lives with wives of their choosing. But Nyandoro was okay with waiting.

Aside from Duni, who was already married and, at twenty-five seasons, had already begun her own family, no one in the village caught her interest. And even when she visited other villages with her father on his diplomatic missions, none of the women there attracted her either; at least not enough to tempt her for something more than the physical. She'd found no one she would give up her life of hunting and brawling with her brothers for. No, she was okay with waiting until she reached her twenty seasons. Especially if Duni was to remain forever out of her reach.

Ny gripped her spear with a sweat-slick hand as stared at the slim form moving easily among the sister-wives, a group of women who differed as much in age as they did in temperament. Ibada, husband to the women, was a greedy man with no discernable preference. All the women had in common was their beauty, though Ny would argue that Duni was the most beautiful, and the most interesting, of the wives.

"You have to be more subtle than that." Kizo lightly gripped her shoulder, his palm hot and dry on her skin. "If her husband saw you looking at her that way, he would be the one hunting today, not you."

Ny grinned at Kizo and shrugged. "I'm only looking."

But that was not all she wanted to do. Every night, she dreamed of other things, of touching and tasting and making Duni moan her name as they moved as one on the sleeping mat, naked and wet with desire. Although Duni was six seasons older, she wanted her with every ounce of her youthful passion and impulsiveness.

Kizo snorted. "If I *looked* at a woman that hard, she'd be pinned under my spear by nightfall." He made an obscene gesture with his hips and their brothers laughed.

Ny punched him in the side. "You are *not* funny."

She scowled at him although she knew he was right. She had no business panting after someone's wife. After another quick look at Duni, she turned her back on the women and followed her brothers through the gates of the high stone wall surrounding their village.

In the surrounding forest, Ny and her brothers found plentiful game. Grunting bush pigs nosed through the underbrush while pythons slithered on high branches and monkeys screeched, flinging themselves from tree to tree. This was also the place where they found the freedom from the watchful eyes of everyone in the village. Even though her parents had taken great care to shield her from the malicious gossip, Ny knew the villagers thought she was strange. The sixth child of her parents, the only girl, and too pretty, some said, to be running wild without a husband lined up to rein her in so close to her coming of age. But she didn't care what they thought. Her family—and her mother in particular who had lovingly spoiled her from day one—didn't see anything wrong with her, and that was all that mattered.

She walked silently between her brothers, the five of them fanned out across the forest floor, talking quietly but also keeping an eye out for prey that could turn predator. Ny carried her spear easily in one hand, her gaze roving around her.

"But seriously, sister, you must be careful." It was Hakim, the other twins who spoke. "If not for your sake then for hers. You haven't officially said you're *onek epanga* but everyone already knows you'd rather marry a woman. You can take a wife of your own but not someone else's." Like Adli, he was vain, but wore his hair big and wild around his face. He loved it when his women oiled his scalp and played in his hair.

Ny made a dismissive noise. Why did she have to make an official declaration of what was already obvious? That archaic system always seemed stupid to her. Her brothers didn't have to stand in the middle of the village and tell everyone they preferred girls so why should she? Ny turned to Hakim. "I don't want to take her. I want her to come to me freely."

"We know you're beautiful. We're your brothers so, of course, you take after us." Hakim grinned, but the humor did not reach his eyes. "But chasing after someone else's wife is asking for trouble."

"Even if she's only a second wife and everyone knows he hasn't bedded her in months." Nitu, the gossip, shoved Ny lightly with his shoulder. He was the least handsome of her brothers, but attracted the most women because of his unusual eyes, one obsidian black and the other leaf brown. "He could divorce her and leave her with nothing if you take this any further than just looking."

Ny's brothers had had this conversation with her before, often when they caught her openly pining after Duni who seemed to barely know she existed. The girl was beautiful and seemed committed to her life as the second of six wives. But Ny said the same thing she always did: "I haven't done anything."

Kizo, the closest to her in age and her favorite, gave her a teasing look. "You boys are acting like virginal grandfathers. Ny's not going to run off with Duni or anything that stupid. She's young but hasn't lost her mind." His teeth clenched down on his chew stick.

"Are you so sure about that?" Hakim asked. "Her eyes look a little glazed. Sure signs of madness."

"Bah!" Ny dismissed them with a wave of her hand, an affectation she picked up from her father. "Are we hunting or are we gossiping like children?" She aimed a pointed look at Nitu.

He thumped her between the shoulder blades, making her stumble. The others laughed.

The wind moved through the thick jacaranda trees, bringing the scent of far-off rain, jasmine from blooming flowers, the sweat of her brothers. Their mother had asked for a gazelle for the evening meal. Her brothers didn't think they could find one so near birthing season, but Ny had made the promise without hesitation. Her mother didn't often ask for something, but whatever she wanted, Ny would get.

She and her brothers broke through the thick forest to the sudden wide plain that was little more than tall grass and sudden boulders, pale and massive, laid out under the sun. They clambered up to sit on one of those tall rocks, one overlooking the river that wound lazily around half the village before spilling south toward the sea. Although they hadn't seen much of the world, Ny and her brothers agreed that their village was the most beautiful. They'd traveled with their father who sometimes filled the role of ambassador to nearby villages, and had seen no other equal to it.

Ny stretched back on the sun-warmed rock to stare up at the sky, Kizo at her side while Hakim and the others scouted from the trees high above. Kizo stuck his chew stick at the side of his mouth and belted out a raucous song about a boy from Arabia. Ny laughed as each verse grew more and more ridiculous. When the lyrics came to a close, she rolled over on the rock, laughing at him.

"You *wish* you would meet an Arab boy that flexible."

Kizo laughed along with her. "Sure enough."

Although, like her, he saw himself potentially ending up in an infertile marriage and marrying another man, he also enjoyed spending time with women. His brothers called him greedy and bet each other all the time that he would outgrow this phase and choose one or the other, just like Ny had done. Although, she never bothered to remind them, she had never liked both, had never found a man she wanted to enter into a marriage pact with, a boy to dive naked with her into the river.

"Do you ever wish you could travel to the lands you're always singing about?" Her brother got his songs from the sea-farers, men and women who'd traveled on giant boats to China and Arabia, even the barbaric white North Anglia.

“What would I do there except find some acrobatic boy to bend for my spear?” He shrugged, but it was an empty motion. “My whole life is here. Except for their amusing songs, I don’t have any interest in these other people.”

His light-filled eyes twinkled at her. Like their mother, Kizo rarely asked for what he wanted. Despite his words, Ny knew he longed to see the world, to travel to far off places just like her. When they were children and traveled with their father, they sometimes talked about letting their father return to the village while they continued the journey on, going to the East, maybe even to Pompeii as a cousin had done. But all that talk stopped as they grew older. Kizo knew his reality was to stay in the village, he had accepted it and allowed the dreams to die. But sometimes she wished the younger Kizo still existed, the one who believed in the impossible.

“If I could leave here, I would,” she said.

Kizo feathered the ragged end of his chew stick across his front teeth before sticking it back in his mouth, a regimen that was part of his obsession with keeping his teeth gleaming white and his breath fresh. “Even if Duni would agree to be yours?”

The thought of Duni being truly hers punched a breath from Ny’s chest. The nights they could spend making her wet-thighed fantasies come true. The love they would share, maybe even a love as deep as the one her parents enjoyed.

She turned to Kizo, shocked into giddy laughter with the images rampaging through her mind. “Well, maybe I wouldn’t have to make a choice.”

“There are always choices to be made, little sister.” The chew stick dipped between his lips as he spoke. “Never forget that.”

A sharp whistle cut through the air and Ny looked up and up to see Nitu high in the tree above them waving in their direction then pointing. He’d spotted game for the kill. She jerked upright on the rock, her pulse pounding with eagerness in her throat.

“Let’s go.” She grabbed her spear and nudged Kizo.

They waited for Nitu and the others to clamber down from the tree before making their way through the high grass to a small herd of resting gazelles. The animals were beautiful and sleek, soft-looking in the sunlight with their graceful legs and slender throats. The nearly waist-high grass rippled gold in the breeze around them.

One heavily pregnant female rested beneath a flowering tree. The thick white blooms drooped low above her head while another female stood nearby with a newborn foal. A male wandered farther from them, his horns long and beautiful, dark against his golden brown face as he nibbled at the grass at his feet. He was the perfect size, but was too far for Ny to bring down. She looked at the females again, a tightness in the back of her throat. They were so beautiful, it seemed sinful to roust them from their rest.

“Is your womanly softness giving you second thoughts, sister?”

Adli whispered from her right. She hadn’t heard him come closer, but she kept her eyes on the prey. When his question came, she made her decision. “Is yours, brother?”

Ny hefted her spear and struck. The male gazelle cried out as he fell, blade buried in his flank, blood blooming on the pale brown pelt. Not a killing blow. The male jumped up, a mooring cry, and hobbled into a run with Ny's spear still stuck in him. His struggle was pitiful, but it gave the resting females the chance to escape. And they took it, darting quickly across the high grass despite the wobbling newborn and pregnant foal.

But Ny didn't watch them for long. Quickly, she yanked her knife from her belt and ran toward the wounded gazelle. The blood pumped in her ears, feet pounded across the hard ground, the smell of trampled grass and fresh blood rising swift and fresh. The buck's screams scraped her ears.

Ny's brothers fell back, allowing her to finish her kill. She leapt over its twitching body, avoiding its sharp horns, the scathing agony in its eyes. The buck's fearful heart thumped hard through its skin, rapping against her palm. Its pelt was hot. Its eyes wide and afraid. She cut its throat, gasping as the blood rushed over her hands and she felt its heart stutter, slow. Then stop.

Her own heart was a pulsing calm in her chest. With the red on her hands, she looked up. Nitu and Adli were frozen at the edge of everything, watching her as if she was some unexpected thing they'd found in the forest. Ny didn't understand why when they'd seen her hunt before and killed much bigger prey. Kizo dropped to one knee next to her, a knife already in hand to help gut the buck and get it ready for travel back to the village. Hakim appeared at his side.

"Well done, sister," he said. But his eyes were already moving around the grassy plain, already looking for other prey.

Ny and Adli carried the heavy buck through the fortified gates of the village. Each held on their shoulder one end of the long pole supporting the skinned and cleaned gazelle in the middle. She had insisted on helping to carry the kill, just in case they ran into Duni. Proof that she could provide. But they didn't see her.

Although it was dark and the long torches lit up the high stone rocks of the wall, a school-full of children greeted them with clapping and shouts, following them in a ragtag parade along the paved stone of the main village road. It felt good, a true triumph that made the pride swell in Ny's chest although it had only been a few seasons since *she* had been one of those children trailing successful hunters back from the village gates.

Darkness crept from the forest to enfold the entire village as they walked in front of the children, huffing from exertion, the smell of the meat and sweat from their bodies high in the evening air despite the carcass being rubbed down with green wood to diminish its scent. Ny's shoulder ached from the weight of the buck carried nearly two *maili* from the edges of the forest.

Kizo, who preferred to carry a machete and knives instead of a spear, cleaned his nails with a small blade as he walked beside Ny. It was a miracle he didn't cut off his own finger in the dark barely illuminated by the torches along the road. "I don't see Duni waiting for you to come back with meat to make for her evening meal, Nyandoro." Kizo teased her without looking up.

"Because it's not happening today doesn't mean it won't ever happen," she said, talking braver words than she felt.

On lesser days, she thought maybe Duni had desires she could never satisfy. Perhaps she was not *onek epanga* like Ny and wanted only the pleasure of a man on her sleeping mat. But there had been days when Ny exchanged heated glances with Duni, watched as she squirmed under Ny's naked longing, nipples hardening under her *kanga* cloth, her tongue flitting out to wet her lips before she looked away.

"Maybe that's not the kind of meat Duni wants," Hakim said, interrupting Ny's thoughts. She winced but kicked out at him anyway, almost losing her balance. "Shut your hole," she muttered.

Adli let loose a big, dirty laugh. Kizo lost his place as her favorite when he chuckled along with the others. But he got it back when he rubbed her back in sympathy.

They made their way along the wide road, through the main square with the empty market stalls, past the council building where Ny's father spent most of his days, and past the tall flowering trees granting privacy to those who had chosen to build their homes on Jaguar Village's largest street. The road widened into veins of smaller streets and, as they drew closer to the family's compound—a plot of land with four houses separated from neighbors by a low stone gate flanked by honey blossom trees—the children drifted away, leaving just Ny and her brothers.

They had enough meat for the entire family, including their childless Aunt Basma, who lived in one of the four houses on their compound. It had been a very good hunt and Ny was proud. The only negative, from Ny's point of view, was having to help cure the leftover meat.

Curing the meat with salt was hard and hot work, nothing she looked forward to. Her aunt was too old to do the work and her brother Ndewe's wife too heavily pregnant and busy taking care of her own home. That left Ny and her mother to deal with the big buck on their own.

"After a day like this, I just want a soft place to plant my spear for the night," Adli said with a suggestive circling of his hips.

Ny rolled her eyes, but the others gave their versions of agreement, bringing up the names of which women or men in the village they would soon seek out. Although Ny would've loved to unwind by playing a few songs on her *kora*, she knew that wasn't going to happen.

Sometimes she wished her brothers found it as easy to help their mother as they did their father. But they had definite ideas of what was women's work, especially the twins. Ny shrugged off the familiar but unproductive thoughts to focus on the moment.

In their family compound, torches were set at the doorway to each of the four houses, round dwellings made of dark river rock, with thatched roofs and the insignia of their family—a cheetah leaping over a flowing river—stamped into each wooden front door.

Ndewele, their parent's first born, shared a house with his wife while the wifeless brothers (except for Kizo) shared one home and their Aunt Basma had her own. There was plenty of room on the grounds for at least three more dwellings, but everyone insisted they enjoyed the space and illusion of privacy that came from having the houses spaced so far apart.

Ny and her brothers tracked their sandaled feet across the hard-packed brown dirt to the largest house in the family compound, the one that belonged to Ny and their parents. Her brothers, each born a year apart, had chosen to move from their parents' home in preparation to have families of their own. But so far none except Ndewele had found mates to their liking.

They took the buck to the smaller, separate cook house at the back of the family dwelling. It was a space her mother had designed and helped to build with her own hands. She told Ny she didn't want the smell of food to live in their clothes and in the fabric of their everyday lives. An affectation that many women in the village first scorned and now copied. They thought it showed off their wealth.

Ny settled her half of the burden on the large, raised stone slab near the water pump and window overlooking the small corn field out back.

"I see you've brought much work for me, daughter." Her mother appeared at the entrance to the cooking hut as Ny lit the last of the torches. As tall as Ny's father, she had to walk carefully not to bang her head on any of the pots and utensils hanging from the cooking hut's ceiling. Her cheeks crinkled with the force of her smile, the light from the torches flickering over the sprinkling of beauty marks on her face. She touched Ny's cheek with a soft hand. "Go and bathe. You have blood all over you."

"I'll bathe after I help with the meat."

Her brother's wife, Xolani, appeared at the entrance to the cooking hut, eyes flickering over the gazelle and small game Ny and her brothers had brought. Pregnant with her husband's first child, she was always ravenous and eyed the meat as if she would cook and eat it all. She greeted Ny with a kiss and a teasing wrinkle of her nose, a hint at Ny's less than pleasant smell. "I've made the evening meal for all of us. You can cure the meat after."

Ny didn't have to be told again. "Let me have a bath then I'll come eat."

Instead of using the bathing room attached to the house, she grabbed the basket with her soaps and cloth then made her way to the river.

The high moon guided her down the winding path that seemed to shine with an otherworldly glow. After hunting, she always felt everything more sharply, her skin tingling with

life, her heart beating quickly in her breast. Kizo called it bloodlust, but her father said it was the excitement of being alive. An excitement that only came from taking another life.

But wasn't that and bloodlust the same thing?

At the river, Ny found her favorite deserted spot, stripped and quickly bathed, washing her blood-stained body and hair that was musky with sweat. She dunked beneath the gently rushing water to rinse away the soap. She broke the surface to the sound of humming. Ny held her breath, blinking away the water to watch the shadowy approach of a slim shape along the riverbank. The way the woman walked was familiar, the swaying motion of hips, footsteps that barely disturbed the ground.

Duni.

She held her breath as Duni walked past. Ny swore she smelled her on the breeze, feminine sweat, wood smoke, and a hint of something flowery. One of the oils they sold in the market.

What was she doing out here on her own? Ny stood in the water with the slippery rocks pressing into her feet, the cool water running over her skin like a caress. She wanted this woman but was she bold enough to do something about it?

Yes. You are.

The sound of the voice, faint but so very close, wasn't a surprise. It was a voice she'd heard since she was a child. Truthfully, it was the voice that got her into half the trouble she'd found herself in over the seasons. But this was trouble she definitely wanted. She crept from the river, water running down her flesh, a rush of cooling wet over her suddenly overheated body, and scrambled up to the river bank to hastily arrange the *kanga* over her body and tuck her bathing basket out of sight.

It didn't take her long to find Duni. She'd only traveled a short distance away and sat on top of a high rock at the water's edge. It was a rock the younger children jumped from to splash into the river. But tonight, Duni was alone. She sat high on the rock with her legs dangling over the water, a small pot of oil near her hip, combing her hair in the moonlit night. She was humming.

Duni reminded Ny of the legends she'd heard from her mother of river women, half-fish half-human females, who spent the rainy summer days on the riverbank combing their hair and singing to lure careless river travelers close. Ny crept up behind Duni.

"Will you lure me to my death with your song?"

Duni jerked in shock, her in-drawn breath loud in the darkness. Her comb tumbled from her hand and fell into the water. She gasped. "My comb!"

Ny didn't stop to think. She scrambled up on the rock beside Duni and jumped into the water after the comb. She fell in with a splash that took her breath away. The water, cold and deep and dark, churned with tides that would easily carry something as small and insignificant as a little comb away. It could be anywhere. But the moment the water covered her head, the

coolness embraced her from crown to foot and she felt a confidence in the foolish gesture she hadn't felt before she dove in.

She opened her eyes under the water, discerned immediately the darkness and the rocks and the fish moving lazily beneath its surface. The moon's glow penetrated the water, a silver blade of light that illuminated everything around Nyandoro, especially Duni's pale comb. It floated slowly downstream, the white bone like a petrified smile under the water. She grabbed the comb and twisted in the water, bubbles floating up. The comb's unyielding contours pressed into her palm and she blinked down at it, amazed she could see it so clearly. She looked up and the world enshrouded in night was floating above and past her. It was beautiful.

A voice, muffled and urgent, came at her from above, far away and easy to ignore. But it took only seconds to realize that it must have been Duni. Ny squeezed her hand around the comb and darted toward the water's surface. Duni's rock was farther upstream now, a dark shape against the darker night. But Duni wasn't there. Still, Ny heard her voice.

"Nyandoro?!" Duni's hysterical cry cut through the night. "Where are you?!" Her voice dropped to a harsh mutter. "If I get the minister's only daughter killed, he will kill me with his own bare hands."

"No one is going to kill you," Ny called out softly, keeping her voice low. She swam against the current, arms burning. In moments, she was at Duni's rock and Duni was back there too, leaning down with a hand toward Ny to help pull her from the water. Ny shook her head and pointed to the bank that had easier access to the shore. She held up the comb in triumph as she got out of the water.

"Your comb, my lady."

Duni grabbed Ny's hand that held the comb, took the comb back and held it to her chest. "The comb wasn't that important." But her actions made a lie of her words. "I didn't mean for you to jump in there after it."

"But I did, and everything is fine." She wiped the water from her eyes and staggered to the rock, weighed down by the water in her clothes. It was a miracle she hadn't been dragged deeper into the water and carried off. But she hadn't been thinking about that at the time. "How about you?" she asked with a breathless grin. "Are you fine?"

"By the pearls of Yemaya, of course. You're the one who—" Then she must have seen that Ny was joking. Duni pressed her lips together. "You're making fun of me." She sat down on the rock next to Ny, still gripping the comb to her chest.

"Never." But Ny didn't hide her smile.

Duni was even more beautiful from close up. Every time Ny had seen her, it had been sneaked glances, hungry looks that she'd tried not to let linger too long. But now, here was Duni, soft and stunning under the moon and stars, her narrow eyes and yam root skin glowing close enough for her to touch.

"You're gorgeous," Ny said.

Duni pulled back in surprise. She looked Ny over from her toes with their gold rings to the top of her limp, wet hair. Duni shook her head, saying nothing.

Ny felt a moment of shame. Had it been a mistake for her to be so bold?

Never. The voice prodded her toward the course she'd already chosen.

Duni shifted on the rock, her face a study in conflict, her expression shifting between gratitude and anxiety and another emotion Ny couldn't place. Ny leaned back into the cold rock, any reminder of the sun's bright heat buried beneath the surface.

"You *are* gorgeous, you know."

Ny committed herself to the course again and worried at her lip with her teeth. Duni, though, sat next to her dry and concerned. Arms wrapped around her raised knees, only two small braids done, and the rest of her hair loose and sticking up toward heaven. The emotional tides drifted from her face until she only looked thoughtful, evidence of some decision settling into the smooth contours of her skin.

Ny wanted to tug at Duni's woolly hair, twist it between her fingers and learn its texture, offer to finish braiding Duni's hair while the girl rested her cheek on the solid line of Ny's thigh. Braiding. Yes. She wanted to braid Duni's hair. She had to laugh at herself.

"Is it wrong to say I find you beautiful?" Ny asked.

Duni squirmed, her tongue flicking out to wet the corner of her mouth. "I have a husband," she finally said. "You know that."

Ny grinned at Duni in relief. She was concerned about her marriage, the appearance of things, not about being pursued by another woman. Her smile widened.

"People have divorces all the time. You can decide you no longer want him and leave." She slid closer, but slowly, not wanting to frighten Duni away.

"Then what would I do? Leave my comfortable home to live with you in your mother's house? It doesn't work like that. You are a child." Duni touched Ny's jaw, a glancing brush of fingers that might have been nothing, except for the way her gaze dropped to Ny's mouth, a look that sparked something new and dangerous under Ny's skin.

"I am no child," Ny said, emboldened. She leaned closer, close enough to sip the air from Duni's lips. "Didn't you see the buck I brought home today? I killed it myself."

After a moment's hesitation, Duni drew back. "You are a child who killed a gazelle then."

Ny opened her mouth to argue again, but the sound of footsteps and a low voice calling out her name pulled her attention from Duni. She scrambled to get up.

Ny cursed. "I promised I would help with the meat." She stumbled to her feet, rearranged the soaked clothes over her skin to the sound of Duni's soft laughter.

"Yes, go child. Your mama needs you."

Ny pressed her lips together. She wanted to disprove Duni's claim that she was only a child and good only for teasing. Swiftly, she leaned in to press her mouth to Duni's. Duni froze,

her eyes flickering wide. Then she drew in an open-mouthed breath that invited in the flick of Ny's tongue, a serpent's lick. She made a startled sound, whimpered, and dove into Ny, lips parted, breath hot, a devouring suck and lick that tugged Ny's nipples hard and dripped a shock of wetness between her thighs. Ny moaned in helpless want. It would be easy, *maybe*, to slick her fingers between Duni's thighs as she'd so often done in dreams, stroke and kiss until they both lost their breath and—

Shuddering, Ny pulled back. Her entire body *ached* with lust. But she didn't know what to do. Inexperience and indecision locked her helplessly into place. Then a sound too close by freed her from her paralysis. She stumbled off the rock and ran toward her things downriver. Ny got there in time to see Kizo searching for her with a torch held high, the flames flickering orange light over his serious face. His look was suspicious.

"Mama is wondering where you got off to."

She grabbed up her basket with her dirty clothes, oils, and soap. "I was taking a bath."

Kizo lifted his torch higher, eyes searching around the clearing and farther up the river bank. "You're not a good liar, sister."

Ny grabbed his arm. "Come. Mama is waiting, and I'm starved."

He looked beyond her again. "I'm sure you are."

The family, already gathered around the low fire with the evening meal, greeted Ny with greetings of concern, mock annoyance.

"Are you clean enough, sister?" Nitu had the nerve to look like he knew exactly what had distracted Ny at the river.

She shouldered him aside to get to her place by the fire and to the bowl that was already waiting for her. "Cleaner than you at least." She wrinkled her nose and the scent of the forest and the day's hunt that still clung to him.

They ate their meal, laughing and sharing stories about the things they'd done that day. Ny, of course, said nothing about meeting Duni although her brothers gave her laughing looks over their food. The meal wound down into soft silences and sighs of contentment, bellies patted, and shared plans for the next day.

Ny's lashes were fluttering low when her mother gently nudged her shoulder. "We have things to tend to before you fall asleep, my rain and sun."

She stirred at the familiar love-name, the one her mother called her when she didn't want to say Ny was her favorite, her only girl child who Yemaya had gifted her with. "Yes, Iya."

Offering wishes for a good sleep, she and her mother left the others for the cooking hut to tend to the gazelle. The meat was still fresh, beautiful and glistening in the night. Her mother lit the torches and pulled the stools out for them to begin their work. She'd already prepared the brine for the meat while Ny and her brothers hunted so all they had to do was wash the meat again, cut it up, and settle the pieces in the large jugs of brine where they would lay for several days.

“Your brother tells me you were watching the married women today.”

Ny hissed. She could kill Nitu. He was always talking, especially about what everyone else was up to, when he should just shut his mouth. “Yes. We saw them heading to the river on our way to the hunt.”

“One day you will be married too, my daughter. You just have to decide if you want to be with a man or a woman. Once you decide, I’m sure it will be easy to make a good match for you.”

Ah. Aspirations to marriage. If Nitu had told their father the same story, Ny was sure Baba would’ve guessed correctly, not about her aspirations to be married but her desire to bed a married woman. She loved her mother’s soft and kind spirit. She would never even consider the idea that her daughter had impure motives.

“I already decided, Iya. When the time comes, I’ll marry a woman.”

“But that time is far away, Nyandoro. You’re still a child.”

This again. Why did everyone seem determined to see her as a child? “I’m *not*, Iya.” She lowered the piece of meat into the brine, careful not to let it touch her hands and begin to roughen the skin. “I’ll have twenty seasons very soon.”

Her mother flinched. The meat fell into the cask, splashing up and into her mother’s face. She cried out, hands flying up toward her eyes.

“Iya!” Ny grabbed her hands before they could make contact. “Don’t move.”

She grabbed a pot of clean water, tilted her mother’s head back and poured the water over her face, into her eyes. Her mother was never this careless. Never. Ny picked up a clean cloth from the stack on the table.

She gasped, eyes red and running with water. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.” Her mother put a hand out, blindly fumbling for something to wipe her face. Ny gave her the cloth.

She touched her mother’s hair. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, yes. I...I wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing.” She patted her skin with the clean towel Ny gave her.

“You should go outside. I’ll finish here. It won’t take me long.” At her mother’s doubting look, she gave a rueful smile. “You can come back and check on the quality of my work tomorrow.” She took the now damp cloth from her mother. “Go and have a bath. Rest.”

Her mother looked as if she protest, then she touched her cheek with the tears still rushing down its creased curve. “All right.” She stood up, seeming older in that moment, a hand pressed to her back as she rose from the low stool. “Thank you for doing this.”

“It is my duty to see to your comfort, honored one.” She bowed before her mother, a subject to her queen. She rose with a teasing grin.

Her mother pinched her hip, an effort at a smile twitching her mouth. When she stepped through the doorway of the cooking hut and disappeared into the night, Ny's tentative smile disappeared altogether.

When her mother left, she finished the curing of the meat, carefully slicing the last of the batch how her mother preferred and sealing them in the barrels. She was exhausted, but it wasn't the kind of exhaustion that wanted sleep. She wanted instead another chance at the river, another kiss from Duni, another *everything*. But she made do with a bath in the outdoor tub her father had installed for the family many seasons before, another eccentricity her mother insisted on.

Instead of soaking like she would at the river, she quickly washed any remnants of brine from her body, the sweat and stink of the meat. In her room, she smoothed jacaranda oil over her skin and quickly plaited her hair.

Her brothers were all gathered with their father in the sitting room when she arrived, seated on low stools and re-wrapping their spears while their father sat in his customary chair, smoking his pipe.

"Baba." She sat on the animal furs near his feet.

"Nyandoro, your brothers tell me you have been into mischief today." His eyes twinkled in the torch lights.

Never wanting to limit her life experiences (in his words), her father was always the first to encourage Ny in whatever foolishness she was doing.

"My brothers talk too much," Ny said.

She'd brought her spear from the room to tighten the leather and sharpen the edge of the blade. But she'd also brought her *kora* in case she felt like playing. Her father was in a story-telling mood, she realized from the teasing start to his conversation.

"Do they only talk too much when they tell your secrets?" He chuckled.

He was a diplomat, the official who organized trade with nearby villages, often brokered difficult marriage contracts. But at heart he was as much of a gossip as Nitu.

"It's only human to want something that doesn't belong to you." He pulled the pipe from his lips. "Did I tell you that when I met your iya, she wasn't meant to be mine?"

Her brothers groaned.

"You've already told this story, Baba," Kizo said. He was the only one who had the courage to say it.

Ny laughed but played her part. "No, Baba, I did not know that." Since she was a child, he'd told that story, or at least various versions of how he'd met their mother. The story always seemed to change and reflect the point he was trying to make.

He looked at her with approval, smoke puffing from his pipe toward the open roof of their hut. Her brothers cut their eyes at her.

Her father pretended not to notice. “On the evening I met her, I was supposed to get engaged to a girl from another village. The arrangements had all been made. The girl’s family was a more powerful one than mine with closer connections to their chief, but my family had more money. It wanted to buy itself two more paces closer to the position of chief.”

He paused to blow smoke rings into the air, his eyes at a thoughtful droop. “My family badly wanted this match,” he said. “I was unattached and had no woman resting in my heart so the arrangement was fine with me. But while at the feast where my engagement was due to be announced, I had a sudden fever.” The smoke wound around his head like the heat that must have flowed from his body on that long ago day. “I left the circle to find water to splash on my face, but couldn’t find any nearby without asking some servant to break their enjoyment of the festivities—there was dancing and food, acrobatics, joke-telling—I left for the river only a small distance away.”

He told the story of walking through the unfamiliar village in a daze, his head swimming and heavy as if the sun Orisha, Obatalá, had clenched hands around his face to blind him to everything but the path to the river. At the river bank, he dropped to his knees breathing heavily in a panic, his heart squeezing hard enough to burst. He dunked his head into the river, almost falling in. When his head came from the water, his mind was clear and their mother was standing there.

Tall but delicate, with her long neck and pale *kanga* cloth, she looked like a true vision. He thought he was hallucinating, after all, all the women and girls of the village had gathered for the festivities and were nowhere near the river.

“Are you well?” she asked him and offered him a cloth for his face.

Their father paused. The pipe in his hand forgotten as he stared into the past with a smile. “She smelled like the rain.” His smile widened and he put the pipe back between his teeth. “I knew then she was the wife for me, the only one. I could not marry the girl of that village even if it would cost my family their two paces closer to the chief.”

In another version he’d told before, he said how his younger brother stepped in to marry his original betrothed. But he only told this part of the story when he was trying to impress upon Ny’s brothers the importance of responsibility, especially to family.

“It was easy for me to leave that girl behind because I knew your *iya* and I were destined for each other, and that we would love each other until the end of our days.” Her father looked at Ny. “Can you say the same about you and that married woman?”

By the blood of Yemaya. Ny dropped her face into her hands and Kizo laughed at her. “Baba...”

“I remember what it’s like to be young.” her father said. “Youth hurts blindly when in search of its own pleasures. And the pleasures of youth are often as fleeting as they are strong.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize her marriage,” Ny said. “I have nothing to offer her if he decides to divorce her. Besides, I’m not certain she desires women the way I do.”

Ndewele looked up from sorting his bags of cowrie shells. “If you already talked with her and she looked at you with your big, mooning eyes and did not run away, then she is interested in you.”

“We are beautiful, however,” Kizo said. “Maybe that has blinded her to the fact that you have no spear between your legs.”

“I have many spears,” Ny said with a smirk. “In as many sizes as she could want.”

“What are you talking about?” Adli chortled and nudged his twin. “You’ve never even had a woman.”

Her brothers laughed, knowing it was the truth.

Ny flushed with embarrassment and wished it was easier to keep a secret in her family, or even in the village.

Or maybe she should’ve been more sexually adventurous. By her age, all of her brothers had already experienced at least one lover. The twins alone, only four seasons older than she was, already had over two dozen lovers between them. Sometimes literally.

“I don’t need to have done it to know that I can,” she said.

“Practice makes the spear fly true, sister,” Hakim said. “You didn’t wake up one morning knowing how to bring down a gazelle from twenty paces. It’s the same with making love to a woman. Or a man.” He looked at their father. “Right, Baba?”

Their father broke in. “This is not a conversation I wish to have with my children.” But he chuckled, his pipe wagging between his teeth.

Serious Ndewele joined in on the teasing, asking their father just how true his spear had flown before he found their mother on that river bank.

As they talked, their mother walked past, a strange visual aid to their conversation although she did not stop aside from sharing a quick smile with her husband. Her hair was coiled on top of her head, skin glistening with oil, and her sandaled feet still damp from her walk through the wet grass.

She slipped through the beaded curtain separating the sitting room from the rest of the home. It wasn’t long before Ny smelled smoke from her incense, the one she burned at the altar to her Orisha, Yemaya, who held power over the seas, lakes, and motherhood. Her father she knew, was joined to Obatalá, the Orisha of wisdom and compassion, and had his own altar in a separate part of the house.

When she was younger, Ny’s mother tried to teach her about Yemaya and the other Orishas. But unlike most of the village that faithfully practiced Ifa and were faithful to the religion of their people, Ny turned her back on it all. Seasons before, she’d watched her favorite aunt, her father’s youngest sister, a faithful priestess of Ifa and village healer, get eaten up from

the inside out by a mysterious sickness that kept her in constant pain the last few seasons of her life.

Ny frowned at the beaded curtains still swaying in the wake of her mother's passage. It was strange for her mother to pray so late at night. Ny thought again of earlier when her mother had accidentally splashed brine in her face, the flinching terror in her eyes.

Even now, she didn't know what she'd said to make her mother drop the meat so quickly. Despite her concern, she turned her eyes away from the curtains. Maybe her mother would tell her what was on her mind tomorrow. Maybe by then, whatever it is would be better. Ny picked up her *kora* and strummed a few notes, willing the instrument to soothe her thoughts.

"Will you play something for us, Nyandoro?" Her father stopped her brothers' raunchy story seeking with a wave of his hand.

"Of course, Baba." She grinned and looked over at Kizo. "I actually heard this song today."

She strummed the *kora* again and began to sing the ridiculous ditty Kizo taught her that morning.

Her brothers laughed, even Ndewele. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, daughter." Her father's voice was firm, but the seriousness did not reach his eyes. They were like merry stars in the torch lights.

"But wait," Ny laughed. "There's more."

Despite her easy dismissal of her father's words, Ny couldn't ignore them so easily. It was true. She wanted Duni with a sharpness that kept her aching and wet deep into the night. But she didn't know what that meant for the future. If anything.

Yes, she wanted to undress her and taste the firm fruit of her breasts. But she also wanted her to be happy. Her husband, old and selfish Ibada, didn't treat her well. At least that's what the town gossips said. Because of his great wealth, he was allowed up to six wives. He took younger and younger wives each year, and didn't lay with the older wives except in an attempt to have more sons. He already had two girls and one boy, and three of his six wives were pregnant, but not Duni. Ny prayed never Duni.

As long as Duni was only someone's wife and *not* someone's mother, Ny held out hope that something could happen between them. Slim hope, but hope nonetheless.

Ny shifted on her sleeping mat, the covers, soft and smelling of the lavender and limes her mother used in the wash, slid over her bare skin. Her fingers fluttered low on her stomach, but she forced them not to go any lower as thoughts of Duni melted her from the inside out.

The first time Ny noticed Duni was on her wedding day.

Other than that, it was a day like any other. Kizo chattered at her side, anxious to get to Sky Village because he'd heard they petitioned the Rain Queen and, after being dry for nearly three seasons, had been granted their wish. The rains came in the morning, the drums announced, and Kizo said he missed the feel of mud under his feet. So they were on their way to play in the mud and celebrate with the people of Sky Village.

But on their way, they had to pass a wedding, a bride making her slow way down the stone path with her two closest female relatives by her side, ceremonially holding her up as she walked the short distance to the house that was obviously the home of her new husband.

Ny wasn't sure why she stopped. She'd seen plenty of weddings before and had never been impressed. But something about the way the two older women held up the bride seemed more than ceremonial, as if the bride would topple over or run away without them.

The women, dressed in wedding whites, were a stark canvas to the bride in her black kanga, swathed in the ceremonial manner from head to toe. She could only see through the strip left uncovered over her eyes.

"Who is that?" she asked Kizo, gesturing to the bride.

"Some unlucky woman." Her brother shrugged. "Ibada isn't good enough for a good fuck, much less marriage." Apparently he knew the husband-to-be well enough.

Ny shrugged too and began to walk away from the small wedding procession.

Kizo tugged her arm to hurry her along. "If you walk any slower, the mud will turn into rock-stone before we get there."

Ny didn't bother to argue about how unlikely that was. They'd heard the drummers late in the morning and the sun was still in the middle of the sky. The mud wasn't going anywhere. But to please him, she began to walk faster.

Then the women began to unwind the cloth from around the bride. Ny's feet stopped. This was the part of weddings she always enjoyed, the slow unwrapping of the black shroud to reveal whatever color the bride chose to wear underneath as she presented herself to her new husband. Like a slowly spinning top with black threads attached to the white-clad women, the bride began to turn and walk forward at the same time.

Her bare feet were deliberate on the stone path, while the women, each pulling an end of the black cloth, unwound her and slowly bared her to the gaze of the sun and her new husband. The two pieces of cloth parted first at the waist, revealing the bride's deep brown skin, a double drape of waist beads, and her flat stomach. Her steps were measured. She did not stumble as she walked toward the man in white, her husband, who stood at the open door of the stone house, the top of the doorway hung with streams of red and white flowers. Two of his male relatives fanned him with giant palm fronds, stirring the folds of his white robes.

The bride kept her eyes on the man, even as she turned to help peel away the black cloth and reveal more of her skin. Then the cloth parted over a strip of yellow, a bright kanga in two

pieces, a skirt worn low on her hips then a mere strip of color covering her ribs and breasts. The black cloth unwound to show more of her. Bare shoulders hunched protectively forward and glistening under a sheen of honey oil and sunlight, a long neck, and then her face. Ny stopped breathing.

It wasn't just the bride's beauty, even though she was beautiful. No, the reason Ny stopped so suddenly was the expression in the bride's eyes. Terror and determination both. A fearsome look as if she stared into the abyss of her future with this man and was determined to face it. It was a steely resolve that would've been inspiring if it didn't make Ny want to rescue the bride from the man she was steadfastly walking toward. But since that felt too foolish to say out loud, she turned to her brother.

"I wish she was my wife," Ny said.

But Kizo only made a sound of impatience. "Come on. There are prettier girls in Sky Village without husbands ready to kill you for lusting after what's theirs."

And although that should have been it for Ny's instant and paralyzing infatuation, it wasn't.