

*Sorcerer*  
by *Tamzin Hall*



BROWN SKIN  
BOOKS



**BROWN SKIN**  
B O O K S

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She spent a few romantic days with her beautiful artist. They jumped on a downtown train to hit the Museum of Modern Art. He took her to the new Audrey Hepburn movie she wanted to see, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. They strolled hand-in-hand along Fifth Avenue in Midtown, plunking themselves down on the steps of the New York Public Library next to the impressive stone lions, content to watch the people and traffic go by. They checked out the open mike night for singers up at the Apollo. And in the evening, as Chloe sat and watched television, clucking her tongue over the news (the freedom riders were getting firebombed down in Alabama), Ethan sat next to her, keeping his hands busy with his sketchpad and making small, neat portraits of her over and over. They made love every night that week.

Saturday was heaven. They stayed in bed for much of the afternoon, getting up only to fetch glasses of wine or treats to nibble between passionate embraces. Slowly, taking their time. She kissed him, her eyes closed, delighting in the ballet of their mouths, the way they anticipated each other. By three, she decided she wanted to keep her eyes closed all the while he made love to her. *I want to be sculpted by your hands*, she told him. And she shivered with what he did to her. Later, when she needed to look at him again, she eased back to examine his face, not sure what she was searching for so she made a joke of it.

'My mother thinks artists are no-good shiftless sorts who don't settle down.'

'She's right,' he said mischievously. 'In most cases, I'll bet it's true. I'd like to settle down and have children... someday. I didn't want to bring up the subject because, well, babies can't eat canvas, and I want to get a little more established. Plus I thought it was still a bit of a raw issue for you, you know, considering...'

She rolled her eyes and let her head slump back down to his chest, giving him a quick kiss on his stomach. 'Everybody tiptoes around my grief. I do want another child, Ethan. I do want to get married again and have more kids. With the right person.'

He held her tightly. 'Then it'll be your choice of timing for us. Just like an Orishan queen. You decide. I'll always think of you as a queen, darling, just don't start confusing me with this retainer out of these visions of yours.'

'Ethan,' she said, her head on his chest.

‘Yes, love.’

‘What are we?’

‘What do you mean?’

She lifted her head to look him in the eye, still holding him in a tight embrace. ‘I think they’re more than just visions or dreams. I’ve seen Orisha, I’ve seen *you* there, and it’s happened more than a couple of times that—’

He kissed her forehead and hushed her like a child. ‘Hey, hey,’ he whispered. ‘This is all my fault. Using the *throm* when we make love—’

‘It’s not just the *throm*, Ethan,’ she cut in. ‘Tell me... you haven’t done all this with other girls.’

He looked deeply hurt. ‘No. No. Chloe, I haven’t been with many girls, and when I am, I don’t... I don’t really talk about my culture. I never really wanted to share it with them. It’s easier to claim I’m British or West Indian or from Kenya or something. You’re the first. And to be frank, I’d never met a girl before I thought could handle the *throm*. The experiences are so powerfully vivid, I know. They can affect one’s whole belief system. Visiting others’ bodies and feeling what they feel, invoking animal spirits—’

‘Animal spirits?’

‘The *throm* can even be used to make a kind of second self.’

‘What?’ she asked laughing.

‘One of the legends,’ he explained. ‘Don’t tell Ron this—he’ll get it into his head next that I used the herb to go steal those coins.’

‘Let’s not talk about Ron now,’ she said, tracing a finger along the outline of his lips.

‘Fine by me. What was I saying? Oh, yes. The *throm* was used that way for a kind of Orishan *ménage à trois*. Don’t laugh, I’m not kidding! The second self had your face and body, while you were supposedly “wreathed in a dream face of your own choosing”’

‘Mmmm, I kind of like that idea.’

‘The trouble is, people didn’t stick to using it for sexual games. As with everything else, it only takes one joker to spoil it for folks, and thieves apparently developed this method on high-born Orishans. That’s how the secrets of the *throm* were eventually lost. They were restricted to the nobility, and in the upheavals of history, fewer and fewer individuals knew of it.’

She tickled him playfully. ‘You want to have me and another me sometime? I promise I’ll try to handle it better—’

‘No, you were... Look, it’s...’ He caressed her hair. ‘I guess I got carried away, thinking I had to dazzle you. You say you’re shy, darling, but you’re bold and got a

sense of adventure, and I feel that way, too, when I'm with you. I want to try things with you. I realise I can be free with you. We *are* free.'

'I want to try things with you, too. I feel guilty about Odette and Cliff, but she wanted him so bad anyway. Oh, shit, that was incredible...'

'You know, not every game we play has to be done with the herb,' he said, his eyes widening and his white teeth flashing merrily.

'Oh? You got something else in mind?'

'Yes. But we have to go out for this game.'



She said she would come to watch. He told her that was fine, that watching was allowed, and as far as participation went, everything was consensual. Only one thing was asked of her—insisted upon, in fact—and that was her discretion. Few outsiders were ever allowed in, and Orishans were putting their personal honour on the line when they brought along a guest. Chloe thought of Ronald's paranoid disparaging comments, arguing that her gorgeous painter and Orisha didn't seem to exist until a month or two ago. Now Ethan was taking her to a place where there would be about a hundred of his kind.

She asked him again how it was possible that nobody could have heard of Orisha. He merely laughed and asked her how many black Americans, let alone white ones, knew of the Samburu or Wolof, Hutus or the Amhara?

She asked him where they were going. He was pretty mysterious, refusing to tell her until they hit the street. He baffled her by suggesting she not bring her handbag, not because it wouldn't be safe where they were going, only that she would probably not want 'any encumbrances'. And walking along Madison, she asked a second time: So where are we going? Hands shoved into his pockets, his manner casual, he answered, 'A nightclub.' The expatriate community, he explained, mixed their practices of native beliefs with a few modern trappings. She didn't know what he meant, and he only gave her a Cheshire cat grin and replied, 'Your dreams about Orisha are more accurate than you think.'

So she was mildly disappointed when they walked up to the burned out sign for a joint that was called BARRON'S CHOICE—or used to be. They stepped inside to find the huge room you'd expect with any club, decorative lights overhead and a boogie blues band wailing away on the low stage. They were doing a decent cover of *Pride and Joy* as Ethan led her in, and it took Chloe a moment to notice the differences. There were carved masks on the wall, display weapons just like Ethan had decorating his apartment. No one stamped their hands. Instead, the girl at the front counter who took Ethan's cover charge turned to a metal dress rack behind her and handed them two neatly folded bundles of white clothes.

Chloe looked to the dance floor. Yes, everyone was wearing white, men in short sleeve shirts and trousers like deck pants, the women in cotton tops and skirts or long white dresses.

'I'll meet you near the bar,' Ethan shouted over the music, kissing her cheek. 'Hurry up!' And he pointed to a door that seemed to lead to a ladies' changing room. She went in. Clothes were folded or piled on benches, one or two girls in the midst of slipping on their white outfits and heading out the door. Jesus, thought Chloe, no lockers or anything. The Orishans were a trusting folk.

As she slipped off her dress, she realised she would have to abandon her bra as well. The little white top was a halter with a funny cut that left little to the imagination. Her nipples poked through the flimsy material. She pulled on the white skirt and was mildly grateful that she had decided tonight on her white pumps. Ethan would be waiting for her.

It took a while to find him through the clouds of smoke and clusters of people. He handed her what looked like an oversized glass of sangria, having to yell in her ear that she looked beautiful and was she having a good time? She nodded. She smiled and caressed the back of his neck, feeling a bit on edge. *What are you waiting for?* Relax, she told herself, feeling foolish. Did she expect to suddenly snap back to her private garden and find Lisha and a very paternal elephant there to greet her? You're at a club. Listen to the music. The only Orishan thing she'd seen up to this moment was the interior decorating. And maybe that was good. She could use a *normal* evening with her lover after all of Ronald's suspicions and her bizarre dreams. (Yes, they're dreams, they have to be.)

She tugged Ethan's arm, leading him out to the dance floor.

They danced. He was a good dancer, trying to match her rhythms, smiling and attentive. Chloe let her spirit lift and surveyed the crowd around them. It looked like two hundred people in here, two hundred brown bodies wrapped in white jostling together in this room that didn't seem to allow in fresh air. And yahoo, a night like this is what she needed! Really. It took her a while to register how there was something more in the air, how the Orishans were getting down to business with more than the music. Sure, back in school she had gone out with boys to clubs packed like this, everyone getting sweaty and the music loud and pulsing. Only she had never been to a club where the atmosphere was so sexually charged.

At first the driving rhythm and the bleating horns sounded like a fusion of jazz and what she'd heard was called *ska*, but the incessant beating of the drums seemed to take over, until the music lost all its Western flourishes and was more African, tribal in its rhythms. She glanced around her. The dancers were losing

their inhibitions, and it appeared that they had dressed for this very moment, their flimsy cotton outfits tearing with their gyrations and coming apart. A woman pulled her top over her head, her full brown breasts jiggling as she shook her body. Another girl moved her hips furiously to the beat, and she tore a long line of buttons that seemed to hold her skirt closed. Like curtains, they parted, and Chloe and everyone else could see the glistening beads of perspiration on the bush of her pussy. Her partner danced forward and caressed her thighs to the beat, danced back and danced forward to touch her again. Men were naked to the waist. Men's erections were tenting their white crotches, and in several cases, their cocks thrust out over the tops of their trousers.

In the corner, she saw the cleft of a man's buttocks, his pants pulled down just enough so that he could penetrate his limber woman, her leg wrapped around his back as he thrust into her in time with the music. Two couples away, and another pair were at it, the man pushing his mate forward until she rested for balance on a laughing woman, and Chloe watched the guy's slick engorged penis sinking into her and out again. All of it in time with the beat, all of it making her recall her first journey into Orisha, only this was not open country. She was in Harlem, in a club with strangers, and where was Ethan anyway? She had lost sight of him in the gyrating crowd, and it was at that moment that her wandering thoughts were interrupted by a cackling peal of laughter. A light-skinned girl with a freckled complexion was suddenly hugging her, and as Chloe moved to return the embrace, the girl drew back and ripped away her top.

'Don't!' she squealed, but too late, she didn't have anything to wrap around her any more. She left Chloe with no escape into modesty. Topless now, shit she was topless—

'Dance,' murmured a woman's reassuring voice behind her.

Hips behind hers, urging her to keep time with the music, and graceful feminine arms wrapped around her chest to calm her down. No one can see anything, thought Chloe. Her new friend must know it was too much, and together, they would retreat to the ladies' room. But the woman behind her danced in place, her hands taking Chloe's to lead her in the improvised choreography, and little by little, she moved Chloe's arms away from her breasts. No one was really looking. So much nudity in here, no one paying exclusive attention to her.

Dance.

The drink hit her all at once, and for a moment, she thought she would swoon. The freckled light-skinned girl was back, a comforting hand on Chloe's shoulder, and she thought she heard the girl pronounce the words *are you all right?* But she couldn't hear her over the music. The girl smiled and took a long

pull of a fat, sausage-like cigar, then offered it to her. Chloe accepted it and took a hit, the tobacco and whatever narcotic in it, *throm* by its taste and smell, making the edges of the room and the reflections of glass suddenly sharper.

She was thirsty. Someone passed her a gigantic novelty glass of the Orishan sangria or whatever it was, and she drank. The edges stayed sharp, and she felt awake again. She could feel everything, sweat rolling down from her neck onto her bare tits, on display for everyone to see, and it was amazing to be open like this. The freckled girl laughed again and kissed her like a lover. With a wave she was gone, even as Chloe felt a confusing flush of excitement. It didn't matter. *Dance*, she told herself, laughing giddily. She was among new friends, and if the girl had gone, someone else would come along. Someone did. She felt strange hands behind her, touching her breasts, squeezing them and massaging them even as a throbbing erection brushed up against the back of her thigh.

She craned her head, first in instinctive panic but also curiosity. The man was reasonably good-looking, but there was something predatory in his flashing grin. Should she shove him away? He had a nice chest, his arms muscular like Ethan's, his trousers unzipped and open, and the alcohol and herbs let her float on a tide of relaxed euphoria. Everything was consensual here. She would dance away in a minute. She would let him know that this was enough play. But he was rubbing up against her now, a thin sheath of her cotton skirt between his cock and her ass, *and I don't know you and what am I doing?* His hands still massaging her breasts, and the way he teased them to hard points was pleasant. Where was Ethan? She wanted—

His large hand under the skirt and between her legs now, fingering the lips of her vagina, her sweaty hand reaching around to grip his cock. *And what am I doing?* As she took her hand away, her vision blurred for a moment, and she slipped. His arms caught her, and as she sputtered in laughter, feeling clumsy and foolish and still stumbling half in his embrace, the truth hit her like an afterthought. She had slipped on her own skirt. It had kited its way to the floor, abandoned, undone by his hand or their feverish petting. Her panties were gone, torn away as well. She was completely naked except for her white pumps, and yet she felt she was still clothed, wearing a layer of her own hot perspiration and the steamy air. His hand was between her legs again, stroking her in time with the relentless music, one song that seemed to go on forever, and she stopped dancing as three of his fingers penetrated her, pushing in and out of her hot gates. Hypnotized by the sensation, she couldn't believe it was happening any more, naked and being masturbated by this stranger in front of dozens, not in Orisha but here, and she must be back in her apartment, playing with herself, half-asleep and sub-

merged in her own fantasies. But she could smell rum on the man's breath, her leg being lifted to wrap around his waist as he hunched a little, and *no*, kissing her neck, and *no*, she was indeed here, the music still sounding faraway as if her ears were plugged from ducking underwater in a pool, as the bulb of his cock made a tentative push into her vagina. *No*.

Sliding more into her, five, ten delicious strokes of him, Chloe biting her lip before she made a little hop to pop him loose and bring her leg down. *No*, she mouthed to him, and fortunately, he only looked at her with hurt eyes. She stepped forward to kiss him as way of apology, confused, not knowing what she wanted, taking his hand to bring it to her mound again, because yes, she wanted this, but not with him, not with him. If I'm going to let go here, then—

And she snatched up the goblet of drink making another pass, just for courage, and maybe there was such a thing as spirits, *lwa*, that could possess souls. She felt a surge of adrenaline. *Look at me then*, she thought. *I'm naked so do look at me!* She began to dance frantically, caressing her breasts and gyrating her hips, dropping to all fours and thrusting her ass in the air, dancing the way she had always wished she could as a child, taking those classes before the instructor said she was too tall, dancing as she had seen the women dance in those movies of far-off countries. She rested on her knees, bobbing her head, she sank back until her shoulder blades nearly touched the floor, her thighs needing to part with the exertion, her pussy on show for all. And look at me, look at me, the chant in her head becoming a whisper aloud, 'Fuck me, fuck me...'

And oh, god, she was ready to let go, and where was that strange man, because she would let him in now, she was ready. Orisha is here. And as in Orisha, arms were holding her again, lifting her, and her rational mind kicked in for the briefest second as she panicked that she had gone too far, but no, they were only carrying her. There was a raised platform. They wanted her to dance before everyone. A light hit her, a spotlight, and she couldn't see into the blackness of the dance floor but knew they were all there, panting now and doing it all again, touching her breasts, swaying her hips to music, the lights so hot that as she shook her body, flecks and beads of perspiration flew away, and multiple hands lifted and fell in a choreographed wave, a circle of nude girls and yes, men completely naked now, forming a half circle behind her, capering and leaping about. *Come on*, she thought, the lights so hot on her, *Come on*, her want building. *And what are you doing, Chloe? What are you doing?* Because she was opening her legs, one finger anxiously strumming her clitoris. Depraved, I'm depraved. This isn't Orisha. But I need to come, and as she collapsed, a hand touched her back.

It was Ethan. Ethan naked and urging her to bring her knees up, his cock swollen and slick, and she needed him and didn't care, couples fucking on the dance floor, so why not them? Knowing she must be drunk and high, but she was a queen, and they were Orishans, and *uuuuuhhh*, as he filled her all the way, and her pussy answered with new lubrication, and then he was ramming her again and again, her hands squeezing his chest, feeling his back and his brilliant shaved dome, *and I want to be on top. I want them to see, all of them to see.* She worried he couldn't hear her, that he would come in a moment, and she rolled him with a strength she had used to roll the boy in the wrestling pit, and on top of him now, she let out a wail, Ethan gripping her tits again, Chloe rocking her hips, and yes, the dancers had slowed down their movement to watch, and it pushed her over the edge.

'Eeeeeeahhhh! All of you, all of you!' The last part a chant, a plea, a hundred or more eyes on her, as she kept coming, and Ethan shot inside her and shot again. A set of house lights seemed to come on as if to reassure her wanton bravado, the club bathed in a red glow. She saw the naked and half-naked revellers still dancing, some still petting heavily and making love even as they watched her. *And what are you doing?* But that wasn't the real question. The real question was *how can you do this?* Depraved, she must be depraved, lost her man and son, the earth telling her she shouldn't be connected to anyone. She shouldn't have responsibility. And she hated herself for the reflexive thinking, all the hellfire and brimstone nonsense pumped into her since the age of five that said shit happened because she was a bad person. Damn it, shit just happens, that's all. And if it did and this life was all there was, then she could still be up here, because there were no rules handed down from infallible ones judging her from clouds. I'm free. But I'm also rudderless.

And what of Orisha? She had this life before that magical one. And she lived in this world most of the time.

Coming down now from what felt like a thousand feet up.

Ethan, underneath her, watching the people on the floor with half-lidded eyes. Not looking at her at all.

She slid off him, still naked and polished with both their sweat, her hair in disarray and glistening spunk rolling down her leg like tree sap. She wanted to get off the dais, not embarrassed at all by her nudity but feeling withdrawn and anxious to be clean again. Her orgasms had not whisked her away to Orisha, they had only sent a charge of sobering electricity through her body, bringing her back to herself. She felt... hollow.

For a moment, she gazed around the club at the Orishans, and the practicalities of bathing and fresh clothes were starting to vie for her attention. The

Orishans were all paired off or were in lustful trios, and it was probably why she was able to pick out Maurice in the throng.

The strange little man was dressed in another brightly coloured red shirt and blue trousers decorated with gold stars and beads. He easily stood out from the white rags and brown writhing bodies, and she watched him heading towards her with a malevolent glare. He didn't use his cane for walking but brandished it like a weapon, a grotesque wooden sculpture with rope-bound limbs gripped in his other hand.

'Ethan!' she called.

He looked sleepily at her then stirred to life as he saw who she was pointing at. He jumped to his feet, and she was perversely attracted to him again in that moment as he stood tall and nude, his posture as correct as a general's and his manner just as powerful. Chest glowing with sweat, his penis still half-erect as it dangled between his strong legs.

'Get him out of here!' she said. It was an order. She hadn't asked, she had commanded. The tone she used with Ethannes.

Ethan gestured to someone she couldn't see, so she focussed on Maurice.

Just as with a fight in any other large nightclub, the violence was contained. The music didn't stop because not everyone noticed the commotion. Instead, a swarm of Orishans enveloped the *oungan*, wrestling with him for his cane and knocking the charm from his hand. Chloe was too far away to hear but the voodoo priest was obviously shouting to be let go, and her back felt a chill as he pointed *right at her*.

The cane, the wooden cane was sinking teeth into the arm of one man—

Not a cane, a serpent gripped in the *oungan's* hand—

But it wasn't enough to fend them all off, an impromptu army bravely rushing forward to choke the thing, and then the men were hustling him away and out the door.

'I don't understand what's got into him these past few days,' said Ethan close to her ear. 'It's like he's gone mad or something. I won't let him hurt you.'

He wrapped his arms around her, and Chloe returned the embrace, but she didn't meet his gaze. She was too busy wondering why the priest had assigned himself the mission of harming her.



It had been more than a week since Chloe had had a conversation with Odette. She stopped into the corner store almost every day for groceries, but with the owner minding the till, she could only exchange a 'Hi' with Clifford as he boxed up soup and rice for shut-ins or stacked cans on a shelf. The morning after

the wild night at the club, Chloe heard Odette's voice calling her as she left the store. The girl grabbed her by the hand, tugging her to their regular chatting spot of the blue mailbox.

'We did it!' whispered Odette, leaning in and clasping both her hands now.

Chloe knew she better look appropriately surprised. 'You...? Oh! Well, I guess congratulations, girl—'

'You wouldn't believe how amazing it was!' Odette gushed on.

'Yes, I would,' said Chloe, forgetting herself for the moment.

'Yeah, I suppose you'd know, married life and all that. But Chloe, oh, man, it was like we had no control over ourselves, we just hooked up like we *had* to find each other! It was wonderful and weird at the same time, you know? It's not going to be like that every time, is it?'

'No, no. It'll be—well, it can be wild. It can be tender. It just depends on what you two are feeling at the time.'

As long as no one's hitching a ride again, she thought guiltily. And her mind flashed for a second on the two bodies writhing with pleasure, Clifford's dick as it slipped into the girl's pussy, his hands on her large full breasts with their wide dark areola, and the way his spunk shot across her belly. *No*. That was me with Ethan. That was *us*, as I came back to myself out of their bodies—

Odette was trying to tell her something important. 'It just changes everything between us now. I mean, Cliff and I can't go back to just feeling each other up and playing. Oh, God, I wish you'd warned me, Chloe. It's all serious now. It... it was fantastic, but it just changes everything.'

'I did try to warn you girl.'

*And then I used your boyfriend like a puppet.*

Hold it, got to keep perspective on this. Odette had already confided her desire. She was practically ready to jump on Cliff without Ethan's help. What happened was inevitable, Chloe told herself. Two young people who wanted to get it on who would have ignored any obstacles in their way. She could have persuaded herself completely if Odette hadn't reminded her of the one detail that made her blush with new shame.

'Oh, God, don't let me be pregnant!'

'Oh, shit, you're not late, are you?'

'No, not yet, but we didn't use...' Odette's eyes were wet, and her lip pouted like a small child's. 'I'm so stupid! I had the rubbers right in my bag.'

'Calm down,' Chloe told her. 'If you're not late, there's no use worrying about it until you are. You'll get your period, you'll see. You'll be all right.'

For both our sakes, she thought. Please be all right.



That night when she tried to sleep, she was unable to banish the image of that mad voodoo priest and his cheap magician's cane coming to harass her again. But in the cold light of morning, back in her own apartment, she realised Maurice was nothing. The Orishans had made short work of him, dumping him back into the street where he could caper and yell to his heart's content. And Ethan would protect her. Forget Maurice, she told herself. What baffled her was something else.

She had always thought that her orgasms with Ethan or the *throm* had transported her to Orisha. But she had made love with him earlier in the week and not been spirited away. She had powerfully come in his arms last night, and as good as it was, she had stayed in the here and now.

Oh, come on, girl, you should be glad. Maybe you're not going crazy after all. She missed Orisha.

It hadn't been the power of suggestion. It hadn't been a dream. Orisha was real. She knew it.

She could remember Lisha's perfumed oil. She could remember the thick odour of her father as those heavy legs made their ponderous thudding steps to approach and greet her. She remembered the taste of the honey wine at evening meals, and the murmured insults of Palantane's men as she stood on the low hill, facing the Wagado general.

It was more than the fact that she actually missed Orisha. She was needed. I have to get back.

But I can't figure out the pattern, she thought. How does it work? How do I go back? If it's not the herbs, and it's not making love with Ethan then—

*You are missing the obvious.*

In her head, but not her voice.

Her familiar companion.

She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of glancing through her bedroom door over at the web. She crossed her arms and stayed on the couch. But she couldn't resist making a response: Oh, and just what am I missing?

*You. Me? Yes, you.*

*The herbs are only a trigger, a crutch you never needed at all. In fact, you don't even need a man to facilitate your return. You inhabit this other life (as you insist on thinking of it), even though you are always you, here or there. The ecstasy releases your inherent abilities to see. You never transport, you only open your eyes a little wider.*

That's not true, thought Chloe. It's like something out of Clifford's science fiction magazines, one of those funny dimensions. There are buildings and people

and food and smells, it's not just me seeing details in a photograph, it's me going into another world!

*I suppose it's a matter of perspective.*

You're saying I don't even need a man. Then I can do it by—

She felt a flush of embarrassment. She couldn't bring herself to say it, even though the tiny creature was her voyeur, her witness to the act. Had she known—

*Yes, you can.*

Then why couldn't I before I met Ethan?

*You forgot who you are. You transported, as you prefer to quaintly put it, because of a choice. It was an unconscious one when he became your lover, his talk of Orisha re-animating the familiar and sparking an instinctive drive to be among your people. Now it can be a conscious choice.*

Chloe got up from the couch and went into the bedroom. She looked up at the spider, two of his delicate legs fussing over a string in his web, and she said aloud, 'I know who you are now.'

*Oh, really? Who am I?*

You're the trickster, the joker, Chloe told him in her head. My mother read me stories about you when I was little, all about your pranks and how you out-smarted the other animals. All you'll bring me is trouble with your nattering and your fool ideas. How can you know about Orisha and how I travel? You just sit up there and watch.

*That is what I am supposed to do.*

'And who decides that?' Chloe demanded, one hand on her hip. She was this close to getting her broom out of the kitchen and swatting his web.

*I am a spider. It is my nature to watch and wait, and I was chosen for my nature. Of course—*

And she could actually hear a distinctive chuckle in his voice.

*Probably my unique personality helped in the decision.*

The spider wasn't twitching any more. She could swear it was watching her closely as the obvious query formed on her open lips. 'Chosen for...?'

*Your father loves you very much and sends you his love, my Queen.*

Sent here to watch over her. She was stunned. But yes, with the way her father adopted his animal forms, it made sense he would dispatch an agent who wasn't human. So the little arachnid had sat in his corner of the ceiling all this time? Watching her life and reporting back? And he had been there from the beginning, there whenever she had come home in a frustrated rush and... She was blushing. She was blushing in front of this bug.

*I am very discreet, my Queen.*

‘You’re a dirty old man with eight legs, Anansi.’

She marched out of the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

In a furious rush, she reflexively closed the curtains. She didn’t know why but she thought she ought to this time. She hadn’t closed the curtains in ages, and Ethan’s apartment across from hers looked empty anyway. Within seconds, she let her slacks fall around her ankles and was collapsing onto the couch, still feeling a bit inhibited, knowing that damn babysitter of a spider was next door, but she reached under her top to rub one breast as her fingers ducked down for her clitoris. She didn’t want to think of Ethan, not this time. For a moment, his body flashed in her mind, but she pushed that image away, too. As her breathing became ragged, she tried to summon an image, and then a tableau of fantasy captured her imagination, taking over her consciousness like a dream.

She was in the museum, replacing files in the cabinet when she heard the door open and footsteps approach the Information Counter. Normally, there were only two or three people at best who might visit the museum on a good day, but today the short halls between the shelves were populated, and the faces—caramel coloured and deep brown and *café au lait* and freckled light brown faces, curious white faces among them – turned expectantly to her. Someone’s at the desk, they seemed to say. Go attend to them. And as Chloe walked over, she saw Lisha—only her lady in waiting wasn’t in African garb but wore a smart jacket and skirt over a white blouse, her hair up, the only clues to her nationality in the gold necklace and hoop earrings, and Chloe recognised the fine Orishan jewellery work. Lisha, beautiful like this but with a confident, commanding air about her. *We really should get started*, said her friend, but Chloe had trouble hearing her words, as if they were coming through a pane of glass, through a cardboard tube, distant and muffled. Lisha stepped out of the patent leather shoes that didn’t suit her at all, and she unzipped her skirt, and though Chloe knew she was whispering *what are you doing*, she was vaguely pleased at how the the girl’s wedge of curly black pubic hair and her round ass were now on display for all to see. Lisha unbuttoned her blouse, and she was somehow more alluring with the jacket kept on, her ripe breasts pushing out from their veils of business day cotton. The crowd of patrons in the museum all gathered around and watched as Lisha took a step forward to kiss Chloe on the mouth, wrapping her arms around her waist.

On her couch, Chloe strummed her clitoris and heard herself whimper. She swore she could taste Lisha, she could smell her scent—

And as she closed her eyes and returned to the image, Lisha’s hair was now around her shoulders, holding her from behind and saying *Show them*. She was easing Chloe onto a desk and urging her to bring her knees up and spread her legs

wide, and Chloe looked down at herself and saw she was wearing no panties, and the museum patrons all looked at her, and she felt a rush of lubrication as Mr DuBois and Reverend Cobb both stepped forward to gaze hungrily down at her pussy. Then all of sudden her dress was gone, and she was completely naked as she leaned into Lisha, spreading her legs as far as she could. A drop of her juices hit a paper under her ass with a soft *pat*. Lisha was naked, too, nuzzling her from behind. The museum patrons were still there, and now Cliff and Odette were standing nearby. Chloe felt her face burn with shame and yet she was whispering to Cliff, *Fuck me right here, in front of all of them*. And Cliff turned to Odette as if to ask for silent permission, and Odette was telling him, *she's so wet*, and Chloe felt herself being penetrated, only Cliff was still by his girlfriend. Dream confusion, no logic in a dream, but she was still awake, she must be, feeling her own touch on the couch, but here was Cobb and Cliff and Odette in her living room, and she rode with it, feeling *hardness* sliding into her, and she looked down at herself and saw Lisha's delicate hand gripping the wooden dildo with the sculpted symbols of Orishan sexuality at its base as she whispered to someone *here, she'll want you to do it*. Temitope taking the phallus and regarding her with those worshipful eyes, glancing only once at Cliff as he approached and sucked her left tit into his mouth.

Then the images blurred and overlapped each other, and her mind drifted to an image of Temitope mounting Odette, his Somali features being touched by her hands and her large breasts jiggling as he thrust inside her again and again. Lisha was comforting Cliff over this, and it unsettled her how Cliff's hand came down to feel her between her legs, and she looked right at Chloe with a child's delight at discovering a new toy. She knew someone was still cradling her weight from behind the desk, and she started, sitting up but still feeling the dildo, and then Ron was in front of her, wearing one of his best suits, telling her *if this is the only way I can have you...*

Naked and everything about her exposed here on the desk, and part of her wanted to push Ron's hand away and flee, but she couldn't bring herself to leave, only giving in to the desire to take Ron's other hand and lift it to her breast, and he was ramming the dildo faster and faster until she couldn't take any more and lay on her back, pushing a manual typewriter to the floor with a loud crash, and she saw unfamiliar white limbs in the background of her vision, pale skin on young hands that caressed her ass and positioned her legs, and it was the boy from Louisiana, the boy she had briefly glimpsed, naked except for the blue jeans that fell just above his knees as he guided his pink cock into her vagina, all the museum patrons and the staff watching while Odette and Cliff smiled and picked up the

bucket from the well and told her *don't worry about the water*. She hardly ever thought of the white boy, the last time in the park just before she met Ethan, and yes, the perfect fantasy lover, no name or personality, no background, just physical memory and extrapolated idyll of flesh, his white chest more toned than it could ever be in real life, his cock so thick and perfect and *mmmm*, she lifted herself up to feel his tight buttocks and the brush of denim as she—

*Snap.*



It was dim here. Almost complete silence. Then she realised where she was and why the light was still so poor. Oh, yes. Essential that she be here tonight. Chloe was in the Great Library, which boasted thousands upon thousands of books, shelves upon shelves of scrolls all carefully packed in drum-like boxes of thin wood for storage and cataloguing. Those who had travelled to Alexandria often said that they were left disappointed after knowing of Orisha's literary wealth.

Not one lamp or candle was ever allowed within these walls, an edict that even royals weren't supposed to break. Instead, a clever series of mirrors, engineered with diamonds from the mines of the south, each directed light from fires well beyond the library walls through an oculus. Darkness banished. Chloe never understood why this feat of science wasn't duplicated for the palace. But Lisha, always more clever at maths than her, said it was because of geometry. The library was constructed on this very site to get the best illumination.

Tonight the edict about lamps in the library was broken.

Chloe had five priests—for though they were librarians, they still used the title priests—to help her search the shelves. All were sworn to secrecy about what she was doing here, and she had arranged for her regular security 'decoy' to go on a hunting trip with an escort. Let everyone think the queen is elsewhere. She hadn't forgotten how Palantane had recognised Ethannes, how the threat of spies within the palace was a very real one. If the spy knew what she was doing here, this would only communicate her desperation back to the enemy and encourage them to strike.

There must be more about how her grandmother had defeated the armies of chalk and steel in her time. Yes, she had given birth to a champion at the last minute who was supposed to have miraculously risen up and slain the Wagado, and this had been Chloe's mother. But in the years of peace, her mother had never talked about the battle. She had given Chloe the impression that she didn't think of herself as a magical being but a woman, mortal like others, fussing over her subjects the way she worried over her daughter. Father could tell her little, because he had been a mere foot soldier in the ranks, occupied with the few square feet he

had to defend and certainly not privy to details of the larger campaign. The Orishans had won, champion or not, so the enemy must have had weaknesses. Chloe had to know them. The plunder after their victory had included the Wagado's own books, and Chloe asked for these. The one considered of most value was a treatise on war tactics by a Wagado general.

The gods help her, she wished she had paid more attention when they were instructing her in this barbarous language at school. The Orishans and Wagado spoke virtually the same tongue, but their written scripts were different. Chloe was struggling along with a partial translation. There were gaps in the text, and the lines of straight Wagado were a mystery. The letters resembled those used by the 'Irritables' as Lisha referred to them. Lisha, yes. She knew a couple of these foreign languages. She might be able to help. Chloe turned to one of the priests.

'I want you to go to my bed chamber servant. Have her wake my first lady in waiting. Maybe she has a few ideas on what this means.'

'She should, my Queen,' replied the priest.

'What do you mean?'

The priest looked briefly confused, as if Chloe should already understand what he was getting at. 'Your lady in waiting is the one who donated this particular volume to the library. She is fully literate in the written language of the infidel and helped with the translation.'

Chloe was dumbfounded. Her beloved sister had never deemed this worth mentioning.

Gods of my mother and father and all the rest of us, please, she thought. Don't let her be the traitor.

But Lisha knows their language. And she travelled far past our borders years ago, alone. And travel can change a person, more so than even her closest friends and loved ones might suspect.