**IYEMEJI**

Iyemeji was flesh, blood, and doubt. It sinewed over her bones; a brittle form of trust in her ability to do anything—she crawled late, and spoke short sentences, as though afraid of the words that formed in her mouth. She was a success short of being a late bloomer. Unsurety was a cloud that rained under her every step, wetting nods and firm decisions; it was the very thing that plagued her—doubt—a locust dredging her years. She felt it before it happened; the premonition of death carried by the scent of rot and desolation. It slithered around her arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps before settling in the pit of her being. She was a descendant of Dumisa (goddess of love and water). It was in her veins to know before it happened but Iyemeji doubted her strength than her belief in the gods. So, when she grabbed the hand of her lover and dashed towards the sea, in an attempt to outrun his attackers, it was too late. When she stepped into the ocean, the coolness of the salted water lapping at her feet, the once firm and heavy hands wrapped around hers suddenly became light.

Idariji’s scream pierced through the air. His arm had been chopped clean off but the sea washed away the evidence of red dripping into it. Her feet carried her further into the sea when she realized one of the men—tall, intimidating, muscular, with red paint smeared on his cheek—entered the water, she ran. Iyemeji forgot. Like she usually did when she was overly excited or overwhelmed, that she could not swim. But it was death at the mercy of water than at the hands of a man. Who knew the desecration that would happen to her temple if he got a hold of her? Idariji was lifeless at the shore, she did not have a life anymore.

She wrestled with the water, gasping for air occasionally before it swallowed her whole. A machete hacking into the neck of Idariji, the last thing clouding her vision.

When she came to, she coughed. A spray of water covered the pristine floor. The sudden rush of memories filled her mouth with a scream that was stopped by blinding lights and a voice that soothed her soul like her mother’s balm.

“Child, he is not here,” It stabbed her heart. And the evidence of the bleeding was the tears that streaked her face and dropped gently to the floor. Her Idariji was gone. Gone, due to her lack of faith, gone because she had harnessed the gift of second-guessing instead of going with the flow like she had been told over and over again. “But you are alive.”

Her head snapped towards the direction of the voice, the weight of the words finally sinking into her. The memory of everything rushed her at once. There was sinking, a gentle lullaby, arms, and then women. Iyemeji only realized she was on her knees the whole time, arms behind her, and for someone who had just drowned, only her face was wet.

“Rise child,” her feet moved on her own accord, her body out of her will. When she lifted her head and saw the woman sitting on the throne, skin glistening like the sun on a lonely lake, eyes that rivaled the brilliance of the moon, and a smile—something that felt like the first sip of water for a parched throat, an uncomfortable sting that gave deliciousness to water, she knew it. She was home.

“You have the choice to go back, child,” Dumisa’s gentle voice rang. “You come from a long line of women. Mothers that have worn out my ears with prayers of long life for you. It is not yet time. But you decide. Your mothers prayed for choice.” The implication of the ending sentence was not lost on her. Dumisa was the goddess of love. It was she who chose a once-in-a-lifetime love for all her children. Iyemeji found hers on a full moon when she was running away from home—her mother and the words in her mouth, her father and the resemblance of his face in hers—and found solace in the arms of a man she crashed into under the village neem tree. Life without that kind of love was meaningless. She heard of the tales of lovers who chose death over loneliness when their mates were embraced into the land of the dead. It made sense. For what was the meaning of air if it did not fill your lungs with the scent of your lover? Or the song of their laughter? If the curve of flesh that fit perfectly into yours is wrung out of you, are you ever whole again? There was no point. She would give anything to have him back. He was far more suited to walk the earth with a bag full of memories than she was. He was earth, he was strong. He was.

Iyemeji contemplated for a moment before the words fled her. “From my mouth to the ears of the goddess, please trade a life for another.” She was standing, staring into the eyes of Dumisa. Despite the brilliance that oozed from the goddess, Iyemeji didn’t blink. There was a determination in her eyes that Dumisa hadn’t quite seen in a long while. Mortals surprised her but the fierceness that reside in her women, always, always, blew her mind. And she wondered if this was the kind of fierceness that prevailed over Iku. She toyed with the idea in her mind, all the while staring at Iyemeji. Maybe love was a force that was stronger than death. Iyemeji just needed to prove it to her.

“What you ask for comes at a cost,” if Iyemeji was surprised Dumisa was answering her request, then she did not show it. The pure look of determination never left her face. She always said she would lay down her life for her lover. It wasn’t a promise. It was an oath and the time had come. “Iku does not care for sentiments. He requires a life for a life.” Iyemeji nodded. She was determined to give her life for him. It wasn’t a hard thing to do. He was her essence. She knew this the night he first gazed upon her and the parts of her she thought dead stirred to life. She thought devotion was a thing meant for gods until she met him. Maybe he was a god or carried the soul of one, for he had made a devotee of her temple.

Dumisa shook her head. “Child, you do not understand,” she stood up and walked towards Iyemeji. “Idariji, son of Asaase Yaa, goddess of the earth, was a thief. He stole from Asansi.”

It was then that Iyemeji’s face faltered. Asansi was a servant to Iku, the god of the dead. It was Asansi that came to harvest souls ripe for death. Mortals had a term called premature—a life snuffed before it could bloom but they did not quite understand; not everyone was meant for long. Asansi never showed up until a soul was ready. His methods were sometimes cruel and random but when a time was up, a time was up.

“What do you mean?” Dumisa waved her hand and Ayemeji’s body sat and stayed still. Questions swarm her head but her mouth would not open. Dumisa took her seat again. “Listen closely,” she adjusted the crown on her head and sighed. “The night you met the man for you, was the last of his living on earth. But Idariji finding and tasting the love, he cheated death. When Asansi came for him, he wrestled. A foolish decision that would work in his favor. In the fight, he grabbed an ancient mirror from Asansi and mistakenly peered into it. It captured his soul and made him immortal. Asansi could not touch him. For your love, Idariji guarded that mirror with his life until the night on the beach. Love as strong as yours is also weak. Because you could not decipher that Asansi was coming, he was captured, the mirror broken and his soul taken. To retrieve his soul, you must complete one task as decided by Iku. And seeing as Iku isn’t merciful or prone to sentiments, seeing as he has a man who cheated him in his bosom, it would be wise to let it be.”

Iyemeji stood before Iku. Love was wise in that it was never self-seeking. Idariji was of Asaase Yaa; of earth; strong, sturdy, unmoving yet fragile. Iyemeji was of Dumisa; water; calm, beautiful, powerful, destructive. The earth was made of water, and water, the earth. As one could not be taken from the other, so were they. Knitted; he was the strong to her beautiful and she, the powerful to his fragile. They poured and filled each other, molded in the same fabric that designed souls. Whenever he was drought, she was the scent of water. Always.

Iku stared at the mortal before him. Never in his existence had he thought love would bring a man into the parts they were desperately trying not to end up in; covered in belief, good deeds, and worn-out prayers. Iku pondered before he pronounced the task.

*To journey to Iku, you must die. But this death is unlike any other as I will call for Asansi to send you to him. But you have a limited time Iyemeji. You must complete the task given to you by Iku before this—a small silver bracelet that hung a tiny hourglass at the end— runs out. Your time begins when you enter into Iku.*

The odds were not in her favor. Iku could simply stall by pondering over what task to give her until the time ran out or irritate her until she spoke but she still took her chances.

*Bow. Do not speak when spoken to. Do not look at him, talk to him. Simply kneel in his presence and await your task. When you hear the task, simply stand and get to it. You are not to interact with the god of the dead before your time. May the gods favor you.*

Iku cleared his throat. Iyemeji shuddered in anticipation. What will the god who loved the demise of Nkosi’s (the god of creation) creation ask of her?

“You are free to go,” Confusion riddled her senses. Iyemeji was tempted to look at him. “there is only one condition. Leave hell but don’t look back under any circumstances and when you return to the surface, Idariji will be behind you.” Iyemeji thought the task was odd until Iku spoke again. “however, if you look back, even for a short glimpse. His soul shall return to me and you will become my slave for an eternity.” Iyemeji nodded.

“Go!”

When Iyemeji blinked, she was in front of a tunnel. Gone was Iku, his throne, Asansi—who looked like he wanted to dig his claws into Iyemeji--, the dogs, a strange woman who stood beside Iku. Exhaling slowly, she began to exit. She didn’t know how long she had walked but the light at the end of the tunnel seemed further the faster she moved. She whispered Idariji’s name she heard no response. She deliberately stopped abruptly hoping he would bump into her but nothing. Even when she walked backward and put her hand out, she couldn’t feel anyone. She couldn’t sense his presence either. And his presence was the easiest thing for her to recognize. It wrapped itself around the contours of her body before nestling in her heart. Hide Idariji in a maze of men and her heart would be a moonlight showing the way to the half that made her whole. Men had hungry gazes, unlike Idariji. Soft, gentle eyes that caressed her body before it undressed her. He looked at her like she was a precious thing, wrought from the expensive parts of Dumisa herself. She did not feel precious. He could not be here.

“I ask for a sign Idariji. Are you there? Please give me the strength to keep going.”

A sign. From the song of his laughter to his slow even breaths, the gentle padding of his feet against the earth or a hand in hers.

Silence.

Doubt plagued her heart. Had the gods played her for a fool?

Iyemeji was flesh, blood, and doubt.

Love; two flesh under the moonlight drinking each other and filling the crevices that they didn’t know existed. It was in this knowing that Iyemeji swore a devotion—to be his well. To be the never-ending flow of yearning that calmed his soul. Iyemeji wondered if Idariji would forgive her. Because it was this same devotion that would cause her to kill him a second time. Love is like that. That is the connectedness of two souls, even a tiny rip, an unseeing thread out of place could cause doubt to creep in. No, not the doubt of love but the doubt of the gods to play fair.

“Idariji.”

It was a sad smile. He could not blame her. He was loved and it was the kind of love that caused a woman to lose the life she meant to save him with. He was gone before she could touch him. Now she spent her days mindlessly tending to the dog of Iku. Though he was not one for sentiments, he made sure she could see Idariji amongst the faces of the dead and that second in eternity, for Iyemeji, counted for something.