

Chapter One - *Esanatwa*

Fourteen Years Ago

The boy was dead and his mother was a fool.

He lay on a reed mat in his mother's chambers, feet pointing north, right hand to the east and left to the west. His mouth was open to allow any remnants of his soul to escape to the sky, though his back was not yet cut to drain his blood into the earth. He was bruised and battered and his head was rather the wrong shape.

"How long?" Esanatwa asked his idiot mother. Not that it mattered. *Dead is dead.*

"His final heartbeat was last night," said the woman. Her face was wet and her eyes were raw, but she had calmed her incessant crying at least. She carried a basket in her arms and after a moment's pause pushed it into Esanatwa's hands. "Would this be enough payment?"

Esanatwa peeked inside. A fur pelt—which might have been dappled and soft many years ago, but was now stiff and dusty, cracked jade earrings, yellowed bone ear spools, and perched on top were green-feathered bracelets. She stroked an iridescent feather and looked back to the mother, who stood shifting from foot to foot and wringing her hands.

"These are your heirlooms," Esanatwa said.

"Yes." She waited, and then her eyes flicked to the feathered cuffs. "Oh—wait." She disappeared behind a doorway and returned a moment later with a matching collar made from the same jungle bird feathers as the bracelets.

Pity pricked at Esanatwa's heart. The collar and bracelets were rare, and no doubt the most expensive things the woman owned. But pity would not be enough, nor would the woman's payment.

"Death is etched in stone," Esanatwa said.

"I heard how you saved Neti. I know you can snatch cousins and friends from the maw of death." Her voice was thick with repressed sobs. "Surely you are the greatest healer in these mountains, Esanatwa."

But Neti's heart only stopped for a minute. Esanatwa reached out, considering patting the woman to comfort her, but thought better and instead grabbed the feathered collar still held loosely in her hands. "Alright then," she said, stacking the final heirloom on the pile in the basket. "Go now." Her hand flapped toward the door.

The woman blinked, unaccustomed to being shooed from her own home, but then she nodded, gave her dead son one last lingering look, and left.

Esanatwa squatted beside the sallow-faced corpse of the child, setting the basket of mediocre riches beside her. She dug through it and pulled on the bracelets.

"Your mother thinks I can wrest your soul back from the gods," Esanatwa said as she began to wipe dried blood from the boy's forehead with a wet rag. The feathers on her wrists dragged through his hair. "As though I am as strong as Belabet's teeth or Abet's fist."

But I am strong.

It was a thought that had already occurred to her, but no one had been dead enough for her to ever attempt such a thing. And even then, who would ever ask her to defy the will of nature?

Mothers. It would be difficult to be a mother, Esanatwa thought, and have the heart folding in on itself in such anguish over a child half-witted enough to play on the edge of the mountain ridges and clumsy enough to fall.

Esanatwa flexed her fingers and then began with the bruises, passing her hand over the boy's mottled and blackened skin. Easy—they vanished. He had scrapes on his chest and limbs from his tumble and she healed those as well. The head was tricky and required all of her focus and precision to replace the blood and brain and mend the cracked skull. Even after she regrew the hair on his scalp, her jaw was clenched so tightly her teeth began to protest.

The mind was a mystery and she could only hope she fixed that properly.

She sat back and surveyed the healed body, chewing her lip. The thought of awakening a corpse both thrilled her and brought a cold sweat to the back of her neck. It was not her possible failure that worried her, instead it was the growing suspicion that such a power resided within her bones. There was certainly something new since the earthquake of a year ago—flesh and strength had flowed through her with ease after the ground shook beneath her feet. Had the earth moved closer to the sun or did Abet widen the seam in the sky? Would it be enough to fill a body with life?

"Let us bring you closer to Abet," she said.

Esanatwa wrapped the boy in a cloth and carried him out of the chamber, ignoring the prying eyes of those she passed. Through passageways and tunnels, up steps carved in stone. At last she exited the mountain at its summit, the wind clawing at her skin and whipping her untied hair around her face as soon as she emerged into the twilit air.

The rift shimmered before her and she paused, blinking back its brilliance. Jagged and impossibly bright, it climbed the sky, stretching for stories above the mountain. The magic of it thrummed noiselessly inside Esanatwa's mind.

"Leave us," Esanatwa called to the rest of her people milling about the mountain's zenith. Some prayed at the rift, others danced and sang around small fires, their voices low and rhythmic. They quieted, staring at her and the wrapped bundle in her arms.

"The healer," one whispered.

She shifted her burden and the boy's arm slipped out of the blanket, swinging lifelessly. She tucked it back in when an onlooker threw her a look of deep superstition and disgust. He knew what she meant to do. The words formed at his lips as he backed away. *Death is etched in stone*. All deaths were meant to be—souls called back to the sun or into the earth. Who was Esanatwa to question the order of the cosmos?

Esanatwa disregarded the looks and judgment as the rest of her people filtered off the face of the mountain, instead kneeling at the base of the rift and placing the child on the ground. The blanket fell away to reveal the now healed and whole boy, colorless skin illuminated by the rift. The feathers on Esanatwa's wrists gleamed and fluttered in the breeze.

Her eyes closed and she placed her hands on the boy's forehead. "Abet," she muttered. "Return his soul." She reached for the link in her mind, the access to the sky where Abet used the power of the sun to mold everything from dirt to grass to flesh and life itself. It was all there for her to summon to her fingertips if she wished. Crops if she were hungry, water if she were thirsty, blood if she were wounded. Esanatwa's kin did not pull Abet's gift from the sky as easily as she could, but they had all felt their gift grow in power when the mountain shuddered.

Abet reels us in, some had said. The god above wishes to join the earth and sky.

"Why would you pull us closer if you did not want to give us more?" Esanatwa said to the rift, eyes still closed. She felt the possibilities of her magic and knew she could summon almost anything she wanted now. Great crushing boulders, rivers of water, animals and...life. *Life*. She grabbed at life inside her mind and pushed it through her veins and into her palms still pressed against the boy's forehead. A clamminess grew under her hands and she knew she was sweating profusely at the effort. She did not know how long it was she strained.

Souls were heavy.

Perhaps he did not want to return.

"Come back for your mother, boy," Esanatwa said through gritted teeth. Her palm slipped and her muscles ached. His soul was there beyond the rift, she could feel it. Why would he cling to the sky if she were offering to return him? "Come back!" she shouted—commanded. Her eyes flew open and she screamed at the seam between the mountain and sky. "*Come back!*"

A gasp.

Not hers, but from the boy beneath her. Esanatwa pulled her shaking hands from his face and he opened his eyes.

Esanatwa's heart shot to her throat. His eyes were wide and uncomprehending, but they were *alive*. She had done it.

"Tell me of Abet, boy," she said, voice suddenly thick with emotion and reverence. She pulled his shoulder until he sat up. "Or Belabet. Were you above or below? Did your soul feed the earth or return to the sun?"

But the boy's brow furrowed at her words and his head snapped from one side to another, then down, then all around as though he could not believe what had occurred.

Perhaps she put too much pressure on him. He was only five years old. "Never mind, you can tell me later," she said softly. "Here, drink." She conjured a clay cup of water and pressed it into his hand.

His eyes flashed and the cup dropped from his hand, shattering on the ground. Esanatwa jumped. His teeth bared into a snarl, and he scrambled back, palms and feet scraping the rock.

A stream of words spilled from his lips.

Or, sounds of some sort. They seemed like words, but they were not words that Esanatwa knew. Something was not right.

Esanatwa looked between the strange, broken boy and the rift above them, mind racing through all the things she knew about death, realizing her own knowledge was a tiny grain of sand in the vast desert of possibilities.

What had she done?