

Chapter 1

Osius Umahia sat inside the Shrine of Sanja, hunched over the stone-tiered steps before the dais that held the deity's golden throne. His white feathered wings, double the span of his arms, were arched protectively over his back, and his thick golden locs hung over his face, with the gentle patter of his tears hitting the stone stair beneath him.

The shrine held a twenty-foot statue of Sanja, the deity of the love charm, hewed from stone and plated with solid gold. She stood tall with a circular headdress upon rope-like braids that hung down to her bare golden feet, head to the sky, her gaze looking upward wistfully, with her slender arms and voluminous wings outstretched wide. Her dress was red quartzite, depicted as loosely fitting, outlining her golden curves. Forgotten at her feet were three faceless men of stone, her first loves. The first of the desert dwellers to fall prey to her love charm, clawing desperately at the hem of her gown for just a piece of her favor.

The Shrine was one of eight located within the Umahian Temple, each dedicated to one of the First Yika. But Osius had chosen Sanja because he was in a crisis of love, and he thought that maybe Sanja had answers for him on the day that'd he'd been dreading, the day of his Yawo, the day he was to be soul-tied to a woman he did not love.

He exhaled loudly and ran his fingers through his golden locs, pushing them out of his face and looking up at the statue before him, wiping away the bitter tears welling up in his eyes before making his supplication with as much heart as he could muster. 'I am in love with another. One of your children, Sanja,' he said, his voice coming out strained and aching, foreign to his ears. 'But I swear her love is so sweet and lips so tender that I'd remain in her trance for a

thousand experiences and never look back. There is none like her, you know, you've seen her, you gave her the power she now wields over me despite herself.' Her face flashed upon his mind's eye as it had been the whole night prior and every night this week. Her almond blue eyes and chestnut brown skin taunting him and reminding him of all that he was about to throw away.