

Introduction

TO SAY THAT I LOVE 'LOVE' would probably be akin to me saying that I am quite fond of inhaling oxygen. Love is the prism through which I view the world. I truly believe it binds and propels us. This isn't a naive denial of the darkness that we know exists in the world, rather it is a refusal to allow the devastation, the horror or the heartache to consume us. It is affirming the knowledge that that there is light. Love is that light. Romance sweetens the casual bitterness we can encounter; it heightens the mundane and makes the terrestrial supernatural. The time it take for two pairs of lips to meet could be milliseconds, but it can feel as if time has stretched indefinitely; you are transposed into a different world, your *own* world; just for you and the one who holds your affection. It makes you uniquely aware of both your body and spirit, it grounds you and it raises you up. Love enriches the world we inhabit.

In this book, I have had the honour and privilege of exploring

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how the power of love has been expressed within a variety of cultures from around the world. I pay homage to the textures of each original tale while also adapting them to fit a new, modern age. In doing this, I hoped to draw out and excavate what these stories can teach us about ourselves and love itself. My personal mission was to highlight how love and affection is magnificently multi-dimensional, both universal and deeply personal, its expression as nuanced, diverse and complicated as humanity itself.

Love is tender, tentative, brutal and bold. It's messy and magic! It can be the most frightening thing in the world, purely because it feels like safety, and that safety is reliant on total trust in another, with whom we share our hearts, expose ourselves and allow ourselves to be seen for exactly who we are. But when we allow ourselves to trust like this, there is a freedom that we can attain – a *glory*.

This book is about being seen in all your iterations, in every dynamic, brightly and in colour. It's about the joy and hope that accompanies the celebration of that phenomenon. I hope that this book brings you joy.

Yours, lovingly,

Bolu Babalola

Oshun



OSHUN WAS USED TO BEING LOOKED AT. In awe, lasciviously, curiously. Instinctively, she knew when eyes were drawing across her, trying to figure out what they could from her figure. Chin slightly raised, arms and legs lean and athletic, and wide hips that swayed and exuded a femininity so innate it refused to be contained; to some it was a call they felt they had to respond to, to others, a declarative statement of power, something to fear, revere. As a competitive swimmer at Ifá Academy, she had an intrinsic allure that followed her as she flew into the air before diving into the pool. Prize-winning, majestic, her limbs flew through chemicalised water as if it was the sea and she was the current itself. The energy itself. The gravity from the moon itself. She transformed the pool into a sun-dappled lake. Though she moved with incisive swiftness, she made her preternatural ability look breezy. It was casual magnificence. She pushed and pulled as if she was conjuring power from

the water. Those who watched often mused that it seemed as if the water only existed to propel her.

Oshun was accustomed to being a spectacle, people observing her in wonder, trying to surmise what they could from what they saw. Which was why she hid as much as she could, and kept as much of herself to herself as she could. Swimming was her sanctuary, it was just a shame that it necessitated an audience. During swim-meets she paid no attention to the roar from the bleachers or the superfluous commands from her coach (the coach was decorative, a symbol that represented the school's power over Oshun's triumphs, as if Oshun hadn't made a dry basin bloom into a lake by dancing in it at three years old). In those swim-meets, she focused on the sound of the water smacking against her skin like a hand against the taut hide of a talking drum. Her swimming became a dance to a rhythm she was creating with the water. With each hip switch a hand sliced through the water till she was no longer just a body among bodies within a false aquatic body – tiled and sterile. No, she was the body, the only body, vibrant and heavy breathing. By the time the music stopped, she was over the finish line, alone. All they saw was an excellent athlete; only she knew that she was a dancer.

Oshun was used to being looked at and ignoring it. Most people would say that, when they looked in the water, they saw themselves, but what they really saw was their reflection, light bounced back. A reflection was just the water rejecting an unwelcome intrusion. Water was generous, but mostly it wanted to be left alone. Come in if you want, drink if you want, but don't peer in without engaging. However, when Oshun's gaze met the waves, she really saw herself.

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Her hair was soft, dark and roiling, with thick coils swelling around her face like a towering tide. Her face held deep, striking eyes that tilted inwards slightly, as if too heavy to stay steady. They carried too much, they carried the whole universe, and were fathomless like the ocean. Her skin was as deep and smooth as a vast lake, its sparkling surface harbouring an unfathomable depth beneath, a whole world, beneath. The water beckoned her in as kin. She was a high-born; unknowable, untouchable and unable to be contained. One could enjoy but never possess. Experience but not capture.

But Oshun felt captured by the gaze on her now. It was all-consuming and sank through her skin. She detected the most tucked away parts of her stirring, being drawn to the surface. She didn't know the source of it but she felt it. She was sitting on a large hide-skin mat at the academy's celebration of the iteration of the Ojude Oba Festival with a loose smattering of people who liked to call themselves her friends, drinking palm wine from coconut cups, her lips glistening with fried sweetbread oil, observing the festivities. The air swelled with laughter, music, the scent of fried plantain, roasted meat and spiced rice. Ebony horses in colourful leather swayed, their manes entwined with red, yellow and green ribbons, and were led into the parade by the academy's jockeys, who matched their steeds' majesty with brightly dyed, flowing agbadas and fila. They directed their horses through elaborate routines with elegance and expertise, despite their heavy cumbersome outfits. Talking drums were having loud conversations, orchestrated by The Tellers, the elite drumming league of the academy, who learned and recorded history through music. They spread news, provided entertainment and bantered

through verse. Their chests were bare, gleaming, and their arms were tense as they slapped and tapped the hide-skin with both palm and stick, alternating in notes and somehow gleaming harmony from each strike. Students were dancing to the tale of their town's origin, to love stories told through cadence, laughing, waists rotating and feet blowing up red dust as they pounded. They celebrated the gods and goddesses who comprised their alumni, those who had ascended to the highest of heights. All throughout the merriment, Oshun felt that look searing across her skin, making her heartbeat quicken so it syncopated with the sound of the drums.

Part of the reason Oshun didn't know who was looking at her was practicality. She couldn't turn to see. Her neck was secured under the firm, sinewy arm of Shango, Student Chief Elect of Ifá Academy, Captain Sportsplayer (of all the sports), Captain Girlplayer (of all the girls), with a charm as ferocious as his temper and grey eyes that lightened and darkened according to his mood. It was a known fact within the academy and within the county that Oshun was the only one who could calm him when he thundered over some perceived disrespect or when someone dared to question his authority innate.

Oshun was the only person who saw Shango's eyes slide from slate to silver close up. She would walk into the midst of a brewing fight, the crowd parting way for her, and lay a hand across his tense jaw and look up at him. Murderous fire would turn to amorous flame, angry gusts of air into soft billowing breath. She would take his hand and lead him out of his own chaos. All of Shango's girls didn't matter, because Oshun knew she was all of them put together, and more. They were just iterations of her, splintered into lesser

Oshun

forms. There was a smiley girl who lived a few compounds away from Shango that he liked to spend time with. Oshun didn't mind this. Oshun knew that, when she smiled – rare, but it happened – it was as bright and as intense as the sun at noon. It could intoxicate those around her into such euphoria that, when the high ebbed, they felt like they were plummeting into the depth of all the despairs of the world, compounded. Oshun didn't know what would happen if she laughed. She never did. Then there was the girl that Oshun had Constellation Observation class with. Shango often visited her after festivities, loosened with palm wine. She was a girl who acted as if she hadn't drunk since the moment she was born, and whose thirst could only be satiated by Shango's sweat on her tongue. Oshun didn't mind that either. Oshun knew that, when they were together, Shango drowned in her, died and came back to life in her, and that when their hips rolled together, it was stormy waves; almighty, thrilling, terrifying. She knew she tasted like honey and liquor and that she left him both satiated and insatiable, tipsy, and all at her whim. Oshun knew that she was all Shango ever wanted and more. She knew it was the More that terrified him. The surplus taunted him. She knew that sometimes having everything you desire can make you question your own worthiness. Shango didn't like the taste of his own insecurities. He never liked to wonder whether he was Enough to match her Too Much, so he had to seek balance with diluted derivations of her. She was fine with all of this until the week before, six days before the Ojude Oba Festival, at her sister Yemoja's Earth Journey celebration.

The party was thrown at their compound, and Oshun had ven-

tured out into the surrounding forest for a break. She admired her sister, who'd ascended from the school a year ago, but she often found her presence overbearing. When Yemoja laughed, it sounded like waves crashing against the shore, and often Oshun felt like the craggy cliff walls the waves cuffed against and eroded. The two sisters had the same face poured into different forms. Oshun felt her sister was a more sophisticated version of her. Yemoja was taller and lithier, whereas Oshun was shorter and curvier, defying the prototypical mould for athleticism. Yemoja was an expert sailor, often leading teams of forty or fifty vessels on voyages of exploration. She had mastered the waters so that she needn't ever submerge. Oshun felt weak for needing to feel the ebbs against her skin. Yemoja highlighted what Oshun lacked, and though Oshun loved her sister and her sister loved her back, she couldn't help but feel lesser around her. People hung on to Yemoja's every word and Oshun watched them do it, saw them use those words to hoist themselves up spiritually, charmed and bolstered by Yemoja's presence. Seeing this, Oshun had tried to strike up conversation at that party, in a valiant attempt to emulate her sister's charisma, but she found that, when she spoke to people, they watched intently as her lips moved, but their eyes followed how her mouth shaped words, rather than listening. So Oshun left the teeming party and went for a walk through the forest, aiming for the river, a place where she felt peace. It was a surprise when, through the thicket by the river bed, she saw the broad, muscular shoulder of Shango, who, a mere thirty minutes earlier, had wrapped a thick arm around Oshun's waist, pulled her to him and whispered that she was his love and that it pained him that he had to socialise

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when all he wanted was to be with her, but that he needed to collect more ale from the seller with a few of his men. Now that arm was around someone else. Through branches that seemed to cower in embarrassment, Oshun saw that Shango's neck was bent as he whispered something into that Someone Else's ear before kissing it.

He then said, louder, 'Oshun doesn't like to dance. I miss dancing. Dance with me.'

He moved slightly to reveal Oba; Shango's former lover-friend, pre-Oshun, her baby-round eyes soft and stupid, small pretty flower mouth, waist moving with smooth respectful reverence as Shango called to her with his hips, jutting in response to the beat of the faraway drums. The way her waist moved was polite and coy, technically rhythmic but with no fire of its own. Even in dancing, she was bowing for Shango. Oshun rolled her eyes. This, Oshun hadn't been fine with. Oba was meek and irritatingly sweet, a sweetness that Oshun found cloying. Even after Oshun had successfully captured Shango's attention, Oba had been kind to Oshun, insisting she held no ill-feeling, that all she ever wished was for Shango to be happy. Oshun had found this exceedingly pathetic and would have had more respect for the girl if she had sworn a vendetta, if she had told her to her face – like a warrior – that she would not be letting him go. However, Oba's involvement was not what struck Oshun so hard in her chest that she almost stumbled back. It was Shango's words. It was a lie. Oshun loved to dance. She and Yemoja danced by the seashore every night at sunset, drumbeats rising from the ocean for them, their laughter melding with the roar of the tide. Oshun danced every time she was in the water. She thought that Shango, at least,

saw that. Through everything, the one thing that kept her tethered to Shango was that he *saw* her. They saw each other. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, when she was with Shango, she felt close to how she felt when she was in the water. She realised now that this was an illusion. Sometimes, when you are hungry enough, you can will the ghost-taste of sweet-bread in your mouth. It will make you hungrier, though, and emptier. And sometimes you won't know how truly bereft of food you are until it's too late.

After a few moments, Oba saw Oshun through the branches and froze. Shango followed Oba's gaze, saw Oshun too, his eyes flashing in alarm, a bolt across his face. Oshun observed his eyes slide from silver to slate. He stepped forward, Oshun raised a hand. Oba looked sorry for Oshun, which made Oshun feel sick to her stomach. So Oshun smiled, wide and beautiful, dazzling and terrible. It made Shango call on the rain clouds for anchor, and the sky turned grey. It made Oba feel like she was submerged in the river behind her, unable to breathe, to see, to speak. Then, Oshun turned around and returned to the party as if nothing had happened. After that day, Oba found that the ear that Shango had whispered in felt like water had plugged it. Try as she might, nothing would pour out. Herbalists couldn't fix it, priests feared it. It forever felt as if she was half submerged in the river. From that day on, Shango was too terrified to speak to Oba ever again and didn't dare visit his other girls. For reasons hard to explain, Oshun stayed. Shango still never asked Oshun to dance.

He was talking to his boys now, palm wine sloshing out of his cup. Oshun rolled her eyes. Shango loved an audience, adored holding

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court, regaling them all with stories from sports tournaments, from the places he visited and sought to conquer when he ascended the academy. His people laughed on cue, a chorus in a call and response tale, unable to display anything but sycophantic joy as Shango told of how, once, a market man refused to sell a lion-skin cape to him. The man had told him the cape was for men with honour, and that he hadn't seen enough in Shango to sell it to him.

'I told him I would rule over him one day. Old fool said that he knew. He said that he hoped that I would accrue enough honour for the lion-skin, that my back would become broad enough for it. Can you imagine? A whole me. A whole me who can carry an ox on his back? Two oxen! I thought he must have surely been joking.' Shango spat into the earth as his eyes melted into something darker than slate at the memory. 'So I laughed in his face.'

With Shango's angry laughter came thunder, and with thunder came lightning.

'The only problem was that now the lion-skin was stained with ash. Dyed with idiot.'

His court roared with jest. Oshun felt ill.

She shrugged Shango's arm off her neck, feigning that she was readjusting the multicoloured beads that hung around her throat. The feeling of being watched grew more intense. She turned around, and through the heated dancing bodies, she saw a tall, lithe, muscular figure, leaning against a tree. His arms looked like branches twined to make a trunk, and so it almost seemed as if he was mocking the fever tree's strength. He was eating a rose apple, white teeth sinking into membrane and then flesh, playful eyes never leaving Oshun's.

His left ear glinted with a silver crescent cuffed into his lobe and it matched the flash in his eyes. It was different to the light she saw in Shango's eyes, which was entirely indicative of himself, his whims. Shango's eyes flashed lightning when he was in the mood to drown in her, but he never asked her if he ever made her catch fire. This man's eyes were calling her, pressing through her. He was seeing into her and he wasn't bowing. He had three striking scars across his muscular chest, on the left side, welts she immediately wanted to run her fingers across. He smiled at her as if he knew.

She turned back around, alarmed. She pinched her sister next to her and drew her away from the conversation she was engaged in. Yemoja was Oshun's closest friend, in that she was her only friend, bound by blood and bonded through water.

'Turn around slowly, like you're looking for someone. Do you know who the tall new boy is?'

Oshun said 'boy' to calm herself, to allow herself to feel some semblance of control over this man whose gaze was making carefully compacted parts of her stretch and bloom into their fullness.

Yemoja blinked twice, thrice, startled that Oshun was talking to her casually about things that regular sisters talked about casually. Yemoja's baby sister was extraordinary beautiful, and extraordinarily, beautifully *strange*. Once, when they were on the benches in the school field, watching Shango and his boys defeat another county, Oshun's eyes had glazed over and she'd said, 'Did you know that thunderstorms don't always produce rain? It's a shame, because the rivers hear the thunder and see the lightning and expect to be filled up, only to end up disappointed. Dry thunderstorms are just show

Oshun

offs. Scaring birds and burning trees while the river pants. Forgetting that the river helps feed the clouds that thunderstorms are created from.' Her eyes never left the sports field as she spoke. Soon after, Shango scored the winning goal.

Yemoja rarely knew what Oshun was talking about. She often nodded and smiled when Oshun uttered things like this, knowing that anything she replied would only ever make Oshun's eyes shadow in impatience, would cause her to retreat quickly again, when her cerebral soulfulness wasn't matched. Yemoja was of the ocean as Oshun was of the river, but Yemoja was earthy, practical, tethered to the things of this world, tied to the non-anointed peoples, so she could relate to them, mother them. Her younger sister had the freedom to stay connected to the heavens, to allow her psyche to dwell outside this realm. Yemoja was the root and Oshun was blossom, forever reaching for the sky. And so, Yemoja pretended to understand what Oshun was saying and Oshun pretended that she was understood. It was a sweet kindness they shared that benefitted them both. But Yemoja understood Oshun clearly now and was pleased. Oshun needed more than Shango. Shango would rather make himself feel bigger with women less powerful than Oshun instead of elevating himself. Yemoja did as she was told – turned around casually – and when she turned back to Oshun, her smile was gleeful.

'Ah. That's Erinle. He is joining the academy next season. He won the country-wide competition for a spot and was invited to this festival as an early introduction.' They had shifted away from Shango and his boys, not that it mattered. They wouldn't have been able to

hear the sisters speaking over the sound of their own voices and the giggling girls sandwiched in between them anyway.

Oshun nodded and sipped at her palm wine. Yemoja smiled wider. Oshun barely drank. 'What won him a place here?' Their academy was selective, a training campus for the gifted. One was either born into it, being of celestial heritage, high-blood (Oshun, Yemoja and Shango), while others were scouted for their particular skill, sourced through tales of power and often mysticism throughout the counties. They were known as the earth-born; of the rooted realm.

'Hunting, my heart,' Yemoja said, allowing herself the indulgence of using an intimate term of endearment. To Yemoja's pleasure, Oshun didn't flinch.

Oshun nodded and poured more wine into both their bronze cups from a gourd.

'So he's an earth-born.'

Yemoja shrugged. 'Means nothing. We are all equal here. Those who are supposedly high-born often act like they were born beneath ground.' Yemoja sidled her eyes to where Shango was sat, tipsily jeering, and Oshun bit into her smile.

Yemoja continued, shuffled closer to Oshun, so their shoulders were touching. If strangers saw them, they might have presumed that they'd always been this way, companions, confidantes, sisters by blood and friends by choice, that they sat between each other's knees and braided each other's hair while gossiping as ritual.

'He is a master Bowman. Farmer too. It's said he can bring crops to life with a touch. Good with his hands.' She shot a knowing, playful look at Oshun, and to Yemoja's surprise, Oshun allowed herself

Oshun

a tiny, fraction of a smile. It made Yemoja feel like she'd won something and she felt bolstered to continue. 'It's said that the scars on his chest are from when he fought a lion. They say the lion wanted to eat his heart for his strength.'

Oshun took a sip of her wine. 'Or the lion wanted to eat his heart because it was a lion.'

To Oshun's surprise, Yemoja released her ocean roar of a laugh; it bubbled out of her. People didn't often laugh around her. Did she say something funny? She wasn't aware, but she found she liked the feeling of being enjoyed for what she freely gave.

'Well, Erinle won. Clearly. As you can see.' Oshun looked up and saw that Erinle was now in front of her, in the middle of the courtyard, a talking drum leaning against his taut torso and his arm, joining in with the music. Her eyes dropped and she realised that, around his waist, was a wide sfftrip of tanned, sandy hide over his deep rust-hued woven cloth. Lion skin.

Erinle was smiling as he made the talking drum sing, joining in easily with The Tellers. The Tellers were notoriously unwelcoming to newcomers, an elite band of expert musicians who came from expert musicians. But here they were, folding him in, and Erinle not only matched them, he made them better. Now that he was closer, she could examine him more. His skin was a deep reddish brown; the exact tone of the earth by the riverbed at her favourite place to swim.

'May I speak with you?'

She heard a low, cool voice that she somehow knew belonged to Erinle, and yet his mouth didn't open. His eyes were trained on

her intently. She held still. Oshun was very sure that he had spoken without speaking.

‘It seems that you’ve already allowed yourself that honour,’ Oshun dared to think, playing with the notion that he might hear her. From the broadening of his smile and the light in his eye, it was clear that he had.

‘No. I was just knocking. Testing. Seeing. We both know that, if you didn’t want me to speak with you, I wouldn’t be here.’

Oshun could see now that time had stopped – or at least it had been suspended. The red earth and deep green of the forest melted into a thick smog. Shango’s laughter sounded as if it had been submerged in water, and her sister’s warmth had ebbed away. Everybody was a blur. The festival was occurring in slow-motion, as if it were a dream. She found that she was now standing opposite Erinle, inches away from him, close enough to reach out and touch the ridges of his scars if she were so inclined.

Oshun forced her eyes away from his chest and directed them plainly into his. ‘Why would I want you in my mind? I don’t know you.’

Erinle’s gaze made Oshun’s blood blaze beneath her skin.

‘I don’t know you, but you’ve been in my mind. I guess just not in the same way. Not in this literal sense.’

Oshun tried to swallow her curiosity (she wasn’t used to the taste, as she rarely found what men said to be interesting), but it rose back up to push a question from her lips. ‘In which sense, then?’

‘In the sense of a young man wondering about the woman who would one day hold his heart.’

Oshun

Oshun found it in her to roll her eyes, to conjure the semblance of dismissal, despite the fact that every cell in her body thrummed with the knowledge that this man wasn't speaking with regular flat flattery – this was not an attraction tethered to how her being in his possession would make him feel. He spoke plainly of her power over him, and he didn't cower, didn't puff up his chest to over-compensate.

'And how do you know that's me?'

Erinle shrugged in a matter-of-fact manner. 'How do crows know when an earthquake is about to happen?'

Oshun raised a brow. 'So you sensed your destruction?'

Erinle laughed, eyes glinting. 'I sensed my world about to shift.'

Oshun's heartbeat was steady at all times, but now it was frantic, hectic, at odds with the stillness surrounding them.

Oshun cleared her already clear throat. 'So is this your power? Summoning people out of the world and meeting them in their own?'

Erinle stepped closer to her. 'It's your power. You called me here. I am earth born – my gifts were blessed to me. But I read that sometimes this can happen when two energies find something in one another that compels them to each other.'

'And what about you should compel me?' Aside from his smile, his warmth, and the fact that she felt herself unfurling around him. 'I don't need anybody.'

Erinle laughed, and nodded, 'Yes. I am aware. It's not about need, but desire.'

Oshun swallowed. 'What I desire is to know why a strange boy was staring at me from afar. I want to know what made him lose himself to be so bold as to look at Shango's beloved so openly.'

Erinle shrugged. 'I didn't lose myself, I found myself. Whether or not you are Shango's beloved is of no consequence to me. You are not his possession. It's a lie he believes to make himself feel better about himself. I wasn't looking at Shango's beloved, I was looking at you.'

Oshun held still for a moment and regarded him, feeling something swell within her. Something visceral, that pushed her to carry through with her inclination to allow a finger to sweep against the lines across his skin, transgressing the lines she drew for herself, rules that disallowed anyone to see her inner-most desires. As she touched the scars left by a jealous beast, the long-healed and sealed gashes shimmered beneath her touch, glowing bright and amber.

Erinle watched her, his eyes veered from playful to serious as he reached to tilt her chin so that her gaze met his, unabashedly, nakedly.

'What do you want, Oshun?'

Oshun opened her mouth but found that her words got stuck. *Want*. Oshun hadn't wanted in a long time. She was obliged to hone her gifts. Obligated to represent the academy. In many ways, she felt obliged to be with Shango, representing the highest of the high-born, but Oshun couldn't remember the last time someone asked her what she actually wanted. People sought to touch without acknowledging her desire to be caressed, to consume without realising her craving to just be held. They looked but never saw.

Erinle looking at her intently, as if he was seeing her More. He smiled and it rippled sunlight through her.

'*Oshun, oh, Oshun . . .*'

Oshun

Oshun froze. Was he singing? His mouth was moving, and he seemed to be starting a chorus with her name, beating the drum, looking her in the eye. The world rushed back into sharp focus, the sound flooding back into Oshun's ears with almost painful clarity, just in time for her to hear Shango's conversation draw to a complete halt.

'Did he just say your name?' Shango's voice was incredulous.

'Yes. He did.' Yemoja responded smugly, on the opposite side of Oshun, as Oshun forced herself to quickly acclimatise to the world around her. Her conversation with Erinle hadn't been more than a split-second in the temporal sphere, but her whole body felt more alive than it had ever had, everything around her seemed more vivid, clearer. Oshun felt more of herself brought forth to the rooted realm. She felt more of herself in general.

Erinle's singing was a bold move. Nobody sang but The Tellers. To sing you had to be elected by them or appeal to them in front of an audience. Nobody sang directly to others unless they were friends teasing each other, friends congratulating each other, or if they were initiating courtship. It was more than being able to hold a note: one had to be able to draw song on the spot, it could not be pre-composed. It's how you knew it was from the heart, and it had to be from the heart. Shango had never sung to her. Shango had never sung to anyone. He prided himself on never having to.

Oshun could hear Shango beginning to thunder next to her and she turned to him, allowed her eyes to be as fathomless as possible. 'Be still.'

Shango's jaw tightened, but she felt the rolling of his thunder subside immediately. Whether he liked it or not, Oshun had his heart

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in her palm. She scared him. The whole festival had now turned to pay attention to the spectacle, Erinle's small hooked cane beating an intricate, delicate tune that seemed to conjure up the image of Oshun. It rolled like the gentle ebbs of a river, it sounded sweet and fierce and plush. Erinle was walking slowly up to her, drum slung across his torso, gripped under his arm as tightly as his eyes gripped on to hers.

*'Oshun, may I borrow you,
I will kill a thousand lions for your dowry,
Scale mountains to pluck the stars for your wedding jewels,
Slap the clouds to make them cry so your rivers will always overflow.'*

Oshun laughed. That was what she wanted to do. She wanted to laugh. To allow all the parts of her she tucked away to flow freely. To escape the trappings of expectation. To *be*. People gawped. No one had ever heard her laugh before. Shango had never heard her laugh before. It sounded like bird song and the laps of a river. Erinle was beckoning her, looking directly into her eyes. The timbre of his voice made her blood thrum and the hairs on her skin stand up. Oshun suddenly felt lifted, as if she was swimming. The drumbeats felt like waves crashing against her skin, beckoning her as kin.

*'Stand tall, my queen. I would give you the universe but how
Can I gift you to you? So I will give you my heart, strong and true,
I cannot conjure thunder, but
I will plant a forest for you, sow flowers that bloom
In your presence, fruit that tastes like your essence.'*

Oshun

It was supposed to be bawdy, these songs usually were. However, the way he sang caused electrical currents to course through Oshun's body in a different way to when she was with Shango. These currents depended on her; it was as if his energy caught fire with contact with her. She had to agree to it for it to blaze.

Erinle was now in front of her.

*'Oshun, oh, Oshun,
My beat is calling your waist,
Won't you answer?
Won't you answer?
You look like a woman who loves to dance.'*

Oshun got up, legs unfolding easily beneath her as the clouds above rolled. She paid no attention to Shango. She followed Erinle to the middle of the courtyard and allowed her hips to switch with the beat, her arms to sway through the air, laughing as she did so, as Erinle bent low with his drum and dipped and rose as she moved, responding when she called with her waist. There was thunder, but Erinle's drum rose above it, interlaced with Oshun's laugh. There was lightning, but Oshun's smile outshone it. Oshun was used to being looked at, but, from this moment, she would become used to being seen.